Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the love and support of my family and friends. I am eternally grateful for your unending encouragement. To the Purple Thistle and the hundreds of people who have made and continue to make it what it is, thank you! Chet Bowers, George Kemshaw, Alaina Thebault, Don Ollsin, Renee Lertzman, and Burl Janson all offered feedback and edits on earlier drafts of this work, which helped cultivate the ideas that have blossomed herein. My supervisor Renee, who has the rare ability to lead from behind, was a consistent source of wisdom and comfort on this journey. More than anyone, Renee provided the tools for me to “construct my own education;” her insight throughout this process has been formative for me. If there is any genius in this work, it must be credited to the people I came to know through the gardens at the Thistle. Those who participated in this study form a rare and inspired group of visionaries whose stories I know will continue to influence the remainder of my years on this beautiful planet.
Abstract
This study emerged from the author’s work in a food commons in industrial East Vancouver. It began from a curiosity about how place impacts who we are. By employing a process oriented research design the study evolved to ask: How may participation in the Purple Thistle’s food commons influence people’s engagement in the urban landscape? The findings challenge modern notions of property and urban design, and highlight a vision of the urban impossible (Chatterton, 2009) that could catalyze communities to uphold their democratic right to the city. Entering through an open, process oriented, and trust centered organizational structure, participants’ experiences in the Purple Thistle garden led them to new ways of experiencing (in)dependence and trust. This had implications for the way they saw the world around them, and the way they engaged in the built environment.
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................................................. 2

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................. 3

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................... 5
  Cultivating Relationships: Theory from Practice .................................................................................. 5
  The Context and Question ...................................................................................................................... 8
  Building Solidarity Among the Many (Or Why it Matters) .................................................................... 9

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................................................................... 14
  The Enclosure of the Commons ............................................................................................................ 15
  Urban Design and Planning .................................................................................................................. 18
  Learning ................................................................................................................................................. 22
  Experience and Place Identity ............................................................................................................... 23

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................................... 28
  Foundations ........................................................................................................................................... 28
  Methodology ......................................................................................................................................... 31
  Data Collection and Focusing the Research Question ............................................................................ 32
  Validity ................................................................................................................................................... 37
  Data Analysis ......................................................................................................................................... 38

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS ............................................................................................................................. 41
  The Emergence of Order ....................................................................................................................... 43
    The emergent nature of organization ................................................................................................... 44
    Impact on learning ............................................................................................................................... 47
    Radical inclusion .................................................................................................................................. 48
  A New Perspective on Place .................................................................................................................. 51
    More than the human world ................................................................................................................ 52
    Rhythms of abundance and scarcity .................................................................................................... 56
    Multifunctional landscapes ................................................................................................................. 60
    Layered history of place .................................................................................................................... 64
  Connected to the True Source ............................................................................................................. 67
    Personal Agency .................................................................................................................................. 70
    Inspiration ............................................................................................................................................ 72
    Passion ................................................................................................................................................ 74

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................................... 76
  The Commons ......................................................................................................................................... 77
  Urban Design and Planning .................................................................................................................. 83
  Learning and Education ....................................................................................................................... 88
  Experience and Place Identity ............................................................................................................. 91

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................................. 97

APPENDIX A: JULY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .......................................................................................... 103

APPENDIX B: OCTOBER GROUP INTERVIEW ......................................................................................... 104

APPENDIX C: DECEMBER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ............................................................................... 109

APPENDIX D: EPистемологические ASSUMPTIONS ............................................................................ 112
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

Chapter 1: Introduction

The urban landscape is not a static construction. It is more accurately a field of relationships, which shape our urban experience. As Abram writes, “The psyche cannot really be understood as a distinct dimension isolated from the sensuous world that materially enfolds us” (Abram, 2002). The place of life seeps into and out of me. Inhaling, I pull in a part of the place about me. Exhaling, I push a sense of myself into the place around me. This constant give and take is the bedrock of my relationships, shaping who I am, where I live, and what I do. This study was inspired by this enigmatic relationship. After years of working in a variety of urban community gardens, I became curious about how place influences who we are. Through a process of inquiry, this study arrives to ask: How may involvement in an urban food commons influence participants’ engagement in the urban landscape? This study explores how gardening at the Purple Thistle food commons affects those of us who dedicate significant time and energy towards such activities. How are we impacted by this work, and what could the implications of this be?

Cultivating Relationships: Theory from Practice

Since December of 2009, I have been involved as a volunteer with the Purple Thistle food commons, a food sovereignty and land reclamation project based out of the Purple Thistle, a youth-centered but generationally inclusive arts and activism centre in East Vancouver, BC, Canada. For three years I volunteered approximately once per month with the Purple Thistle

---

1 The Thistle operates in four main ways: they are open in the afternoon and evenings for drop in, they run classes and projects of all kinds, they run full-time, paid training programs during the day, focused around arts, community
garden project, offering: advice, labor, plant materials, composting workshops, and other forms of help useful to the collective of gardeners. With eight years of experience leading environmental education initiatives in schools and communities, and a growing knowledge of urban agriculture and horticulture, my skills were put to good use in the Thistle garden.

In the last decade I have been fortunate to be able to work with dozens of people to reclaim and maintain a number of food commons on degraded parcels of public land. The diversity of social and ecological organization in these spaces inspired me to see food commons as potential spaces of resistance, where alternative ways of relating to place and one another could be explored and promoted. After working to establish food commons in degraded places in the city, it seemed that many people's “objective” experience of reality shifted, and they began to perceive the “real world” in different terms. I became interested in how this influenced the ways that individuals made meaning of the multiple relationships that comprised their “reality” in the city. By participating in land reclamation in the urban core, I hypothesized that people's “objective” experience of the urban landscape began to change. People demonstrated more awareness of the world around them; they wanted to participate in the life of their community. Many people involved in stewarding food commons started to understand the city not as a static landscape, but as a conversant other.

Individual psychology, social process, and spatial forms began to appear to me as intimately interconnected experiences. This study emerged as a way to explore how the personal, social, and spatial collide in urban food commons. While they are small and largely invisible, work, etc, and they give lots of groups, big and small, the use of their space for meetings, conferences, gatherings or as a work-space.
urban food commons are rich landscapes of possibility. They exist on a cutting edge between public and private, offering a third way of conceptualizing our relationship to place, each other, and ourselves. In a world dominated by private enterprise and individual notions of independence, these landscapes of possibility present fertile grounds for the exploration of new ways to organize and experience urban life.

It is a frustrating truth that many people who live in urban landscapes have little power to influence or direct their home's development, decay, and re-birth. The youth that I worked with at the Purple Thistle either lived with their parents in suburban row housing or rented homes that all looked like each other. The public urban landscape accessible to them was dominated by concrete streetscapes and flat, boxy, industrial or commercial buildings. For much of their lives, these people had little voice in their space’s construction, maintenance, and evolution. Our small reclamation project in one of the city’s worst neighborhoods was the first place where these youth could actively influence the design of the built environment. The fact that very few people in Vancouver have a voice in how their home place is created is a reality that most people take for granted. As I witnessed place's influence upon people working on reclaiming food commons, I increasingly questioned the hidden forms of power that exist in the urban landscape (Gaventa, 2006). Despite its significant impact upon our “objective” experience, many young people seem (on observation) unconcerned about the influences their environment has on them. I want to know if (or how) a food commons provides participants in the Thistle garden with an opportunity to take up new positions in their thinking about the built environment.
The Context and Question

The Purple Thistle Guerilla Gardeners presented an evocative medium through which to explore and focus my interest in the intersections between personal, social, and spatial forms. The situation of the group’s impressively diverse and ever changing gardens within a neighborhood dominated by industrial warehousing and stark streetscapes provided a compelling landscape to build from. The myriad people whom I worked with in the Thistle’s gardens also seemed to be deeply exploring the same questions as I, though in their own unique ways. Talking with these people, in this study and in my years of volunteer work, I came to the question that will guide this inquiry: How may involvement in the Purple Thistle food commons influence participant’s engagement in the urban landscape?

I use the term ‘engagement’ in this context to denote specific meanings. First, it connotes the notion of space as constitutive of the relationships between things – and so to ‘engage’ is to be involved in a conversation or discussion with the elements that create urban space (Chatterton, 2010). I am curious about how the Thistle’s food commons may influence the conversations participants’ have within the city. Engagement here is also about participation, and the action of becoming involved (Harvey, 1973). With this question I also want to explore people’s actions and involvement in the urban landscape. Finally, engagement is a kind of a pledge to do something (Massey, 2004). I explore whether the Thistle food commons moves people to make a kind of pledge to engage, or do something new, in the urban landscape.

The desire to better understand the experience of engagement at the Purple Thistle led me to adopt a phenomenological, narrative research methodology. Using the biographical
interpretive interview methods developed by Hollway & Jefferson (2000) I was able to access rich narratives of ten people’s engagement in the Purple Thistle garden. These personal stories form the backbone of this study. The use of this methodology, stacked upon my own rich contextual knowledge from years of engagement in the project, allowed me to delve into the multiple ways in which individuals engaged in both the Thistle garden and the landscape of Vancouver (Lertzman, personal communication). My interest in exploring the influence of the garden upon participants’ engagements in the urban landscape grew from participant narratives. In this way I designed a participatory action research approach (Montero, 2000), which allowed me to follow participant dialogue and craft a research focus that emerged from participant narratives (Lertzman, personal communication).

Building Solidarity Among the Many (Or Why it Matters)

The physical places many of us live within are no longer built by communities; instead, places are constructed by expert planners and professional architects, people who are most often several steps removed from the needs and desires of the community that will reside within the place they are designing (Alexander, 1979). These few experts have unprecedented power to shape and direct urban development. As a result, their privileged worldviews become enshrined in the structures and patterns of our cities (Alexander, 1979). The dilemma that this study seeks to address is how privileged worldviews recursively construct landscapes of oppression that oppress and subjugate the many in favor of the few (Sibley, 1995). Our urban environments are built and maintained by a tiny minority, whose education was long ago colonized by an insular, self-interested worldview (Bowers, 2012; Illich, 1973; Alexander, 1979). This privileged
minority designs cities that propagate powerlessness and a pernicious form of forced enclosure (Harvey, 1973). The result is that many people today feel themselves incapable of engaging in creatively making their community (Alexander, 1979). Our western society has fallen prey to a created myth of independence that is defined by consumer choice and free markets (Bowers, 2012). Our ability to live in community is eroded by this desire for independence. Working together has been increasingly done through the mechanism of large institutions, created by the same colonized worldview that defined our city planner’s education (Illich, 1973).

This study highlights alternatives. By exploring what happens when communities are empowered to creatively engage with and shape the built environments they live in, this study exposes the myth of independence. It shows that dependence is essential to life, and that no one is ever free from the multiple webs of interaction and relationship that sustain them. Uncovering what unfolds when local people work together to meet some of their basic needs, we see that even the most destitute of places can become fertile grounds of creativity, trust, and belonging. Working in community with diverse forms of life and relationship can expose people to a new way of seeing the world. From these new perspectives emerge solutions. If we are to create a socially just and ecologically sustainable society, we will need to more deeply explore the roots of our dependence. We must learn to engage differently within the spaces of our lives.

My desire to deeply explore engagement in the built environment is tied to a difficult coming of age question facing many young adults. The enigma of how one is related in a community of others is among the most pragmatic and important inquiries in life, particularly in this time of global ecological decline. Most of the participants in this study (myself included) are
at a stage in their development where this question is of primary concern. Each of us, in our way, is exploring what to do with our short life. There are aspects of this study essentially tied to the transitional period between adolescence and adulthood, when we discover our relationship to the larger community in some detail and begin the work of adult life. These larger existential questions about self and community color and inform this study in unique and interesting ways.

Plotkin writes that much of western society is stuck in adolescence (2007); we live in a society addicted to instant rewards\(^2\). We valorize short-term, ego-centric thinking and eschew generational awareness (Bowers, 2012). So while this study provides a view from the window of youth, where one consciously struggles to navigate the intersections between self and other, its findings have important implications for our entire society, bent as it is towards an adolescent view of the world (Plotkin, 2007).

Much has been written of the tenuous relationship between humanity and the rest of life. As humans pile ever higher in cities, our atmosphere is rapidly changing, and many creatures are vanishing forever. The gap between rich and poor is wider than ever before, and it is growing more extreme every day. People are exposed to unimaginable contamination, to the point where most of our dead bodies are biohazards. Given these (and many other) troubling truths, urban life continues to promote a rapacious, consumptive independence (Abram, 2011; Linn, 2005; Orr, 1994). We desperately need alternatives to help unpave a road to recovery. The astute have begun to search. We have discovered that people do care a great deal, but that engaging with our myriad problems is destabilizing and personally troubling (Lertzman, 2008). As Lertzman (2008)

\(^2\) In this thesis “we” is meant to describe those who identify strongly with the western cultural tradition broadly and its current manifestation in western Canada specifically.
writes, something is deeply wrong, but we don’t know what to do about it. It’s too big, or too complex, or out of our control, or something similarly hopeless. Lertzman’s work shows how in many urban neighborhoods, it’s adaptive to disavow this knowledge and focus on eking out a livelihood within the systems of the city. Many are left hoping for a better future someday. This project challenges the notion of hope and hopelessness and offers a third perspective. While this perspective is narrowly broadcast from a rather radical slice of urban life, its insights and intention are honest and valuable.

Alternative ways of knowing the city exist. Building upon the theoretical tradition of the right to the city (Harvey, 2003), which posits every urban dweller’s innate right to effect their place’s evolution and construction, this study explores how a group of marginalized youth and youth allies have creatively asserted their ability to imagine the urban impossible in the here and now. Developing the notion of the urban impossible, Chatterton (2010) explains that “the right to the city is not just a movement for material rights, but also the right to shape, intervene and participate in the unfolding idea of the city” (emphasis added). This study offers an alternative idea of what the city is, and what it can become. It is an idea that draws the city close, and asks it to begin to meaningfully support the many forms of life that live within it. It is an idea that each part of a city should work to support others within it, in a way that allows urbanites to come into contact with the roots of their dependence, and to be able to help nourish and grow those roots. This study not only explores an idea of the urban impossible, but shows how it has helped to improve both personal and community life in a small neighborhood of industrial East Vancouver.
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

The implications of this research thus problematize our Western, industrialized culture’s relationship to place. This study shows that by opening to alternative relationships outside of the public/private dichotomy, communities can be empowered to creatively re-interpret their relationships in ways that are highly rewarding, both personally and collectively. The landscapes we consider as places of learning, as well as the landscapes that provide our essential needs, are specifically implicated in my findings. Opening common lands for people to creatively produce their own needs has the potential to profoundly impact the way urban dwellers relate to each other and to the environments that support them (Linn, 2005). Reconnecting to the roots of their dependence, urbanites can become aware of the interdependent relationships that support all life and begin to participate in the creation of truly sustainable cities. Working collaboratively with others in a commons environment also enables people to follow their own interests and utilize their passions. The ability to work in such a way promotes a natural form of learning, which allows a learner to be led by his or her own motivation, curiosity, and desire.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Purple Thistle garden project is interestingly rooted in its nature as a commons, one that is both biologically and culturally inclusive. This positioning as a project completely open to participation, owned by no one, yet stewarded by many, is grounded in a rich history. This chapter provides a narrative review of the practical and theoretical histories that provide weight and power to the emergence of this project as a useful experiment in common land tenure. I will highlight how increasingly centralized design, planning, and educational institutions have usurped control over the urban landscape. Alternative experiences in participatory design and learning are presented to suggest that the centralization of power, at least partially caused by the enclosure of the physical and cultural commons, is not inevitable. Alternatives have shown themselves capable of altering individual’s experience of place, promoting a re-localization of agency and empowering local actors to participate in the construction and re-appropriation of the biological and cultural commons. This is precisely where this project implicates itself.

This discussion begins with a brief history of the commons. The Enclosure of the Commons is discussed as not only a historical movement but as an ongoing cultural phenomenon, one with many tentacles of personal and societal significance. In the second section, Urban Design and Planning, I discuss how the centralization of power begun with the enclosure movement is carried forward into urban design and planning, further pulling people from an experience of place identity. This experience of disconnection engendered by modern design is further discussed in the third section, Learning. Here I explore how education, knowledge, and learning shape place identity and personal agency. In the final section,
Experience and Place Identity, I discuss several ways of thinking about the impacts that design, planning, and learning can have upon place identity and our relation to the commons.

The Enclosure of the Commons

Commons are those things shared amongst a group of people and governed by that same collective of users. In this sense, they are not “open access resources” free to anyone, but are “communal resources” that are managed collectively by all who use them (Birkes, 1999). Successful management of the commons thus requires some form of collective organization to ensure just and sustainable use over a shared resource. From fifteenth century England to the colonization of the Americas, western society has been massively successful in transforming most physical common lands into privately owned or institutionally managed plots (Snyder, 1999). Early enclosures of the commons “created a population of rural homeless who were forced in their desperation to become the world’s first industrial working class” (Snyder, 1999, p.188). In Canada, indigenous people suffered a horrifically violent forced enclosure, while most of the country was created as “Crown land” to be controlled by the institution of the state (Snyder, 1999). These enclosures of the physical (or biological) commons set the stage for a ubiquitous social pattern to emerge (Bowers, 2011). Bowers (2011) describes this pattern as one defined by individualism. The enclosure of the commons forced communal resources into the hands of the individual, destroyed much collective organization, and set the stage for a new era in which colonization, accumulation, and scarcity became dominant social norms.

In *Tools for Conviviality*, Illich (1973) describes two historical watersheds that precipitated the emergence of these social norms. The first watershed Illich describes is the
emergence of the scientific method as a dominant mode of inquiry. Developments in science provided humans with many new and useful tools for exploration and discovery. In the second watershed, the tools of science began to be exploited by a small, professional elite. Having privileged access to these tools, a small minority of elites began to exploit the tools of science to accumulate material wealth and political influence. The self-interested exploitation of science spurred a “self defeating escalation of power [that] became the core-ritual practiced in highly industrialized nations” (Illich, 1973, p.8). This ritual escalation of power is now implicitly enshrined in the many institutions that hold economic growth and capital accumulation paramount. Much of the western imagination has “been deformed to conceive only what can be molded into an engineered system of social habits that fit the logic of large-scale production” (Illich, 1973, p.15). The manipulation of the tools of science has given rise to a new society and culture ruled by individual interest and accumulation. With communal resources in private, individual hands, privileged elites were able to manipulate the tools of science to ensure they maintained a firm grip on the reins of power.

This power is so complete that my generation now lives within a world where these patterns of control have shaped both the physical and cultural territory we walk within (Bowers, 2011). The social habits epitomized by “the American dream” are defined by a culture of individualism and a logic of accumulation. “These patterns are widely shared, passed along in everyday conversations, and encoded in the built environment” (Bowers, 2011, Chapter 2, para. 1). The implications of Bowers conviction are described in Illich’s chapter (1973), Recovery, which theorizes that there are only two ranges in the possible growth of tools; they either: 1)
expand human capacity/capability, or 2) contract, eliminate, or replace human function. Illich (1973) recognizes that there is a “delicate balance between what people can do for themselves and what tools can do for them, in service of anonymous institutions” (p.13). Illich (1973) argues that the tools of science, language, and legal procedure have been manipulated to usurp and degrade human function. This degradation further impedes human capacity, as the patterns of thinking that have promoted a perverse accumulation of power continue to shape our present patterns of thinking and acting (Bowers, 2011).

These patterns of social organization have precipitated a secondary enclosure of the cultural commons (Bowers, 2011); our imaginations have been significantly deformed by the logic of large-scale production (Illich, 1973). Culturally constructed imagery and symbols have been commodified, enclosed, and utilized as tools for accumulation (Illich, 1973; Katz, 2008). Metaphor and architecture have both been enlisted in the enclosure movement in order to privilege a specific social pattern of organization (Bowers, 2011). This has lead to the recent promotion of spectacle in communications media (Katz, 2008). The encapsulation of every message as a flashy sound bite is divorcing society from a cognition of historicity and place. As personal identities become hitched to spectacle, the self is increasingly enclosed and defined by communications media. Not only politics but human childhood and early development are all pervaded by a kind of metonymic space, where identity and meaning are increasingly constructed in an instantaneous nowhere through culturally specific symbols. As childhood becomes spectacle, subjectivity itself is colonized, leading to a new era of pernicious enclosure (Katz, 2008) and the colonization of individual minds. Our postmodern lifestyles have produced
postmodern personalities, with fragmented, multiple, and contradictory identities (Ikahiv, 2001). The spectacle of enclosure has created a self that Lukacs called “kaleidoscopic and changeable,” “nefarious and evasive,” and “transcendentally homeless” (as cited in Ikahiv, 2001, p.8).

**Urban Design and Planning**

The built environment takes its shape from a recursive process that integrates existing design and emergent social ideals; as design is constructed to fit specific social patterns, it also directs the evolution of social patterns. Architecture is an essential language. The metaphors architecture is created from become symbols literally built into our cities (Muller, 2009). The rise of architecture and urban design as institutionalized professions has given a small minority of professionals educated by the patterns of enclosure and accumulation unprecedented control over the structure and evolution of the urban landscape (Alexander, 1979). The power of professionals to direct urban design has negated much social participation in the design process, leading to an erasure of many profound place based patterns of design (Alexander, 1979). The “pattern languages” that were once held in common, helping to connect people to the built environment, have been replaced by institutionally guarded private languages known only to professionals. Designers no longer have a shared language to “root them in the ordinary feelings people have… They are prisoners of the absurd and special languages which they have made in private” (Alexander, 1979, p.233). These private languages have an established monopoly on urban design and have effectively excluded community members from participation in the construction of their home (Illich, 1973). Divorced from some basic elementary intuitions about how to live in
community, people have been made to feel totally incompetent to design anything (Alexander, 1979, p.233).

The continuation of private, institutionalized design controlled by a minority of actors is not inevitable. Much experience has benefited from participatory planning and design processes, and these kinds of inclusive designs continue to gather support in progressive communities around the world (Hart, 1997; Jeremijenko, n.d; Kelhammer, 2009; Linn, 2007). Ecologically minded design promotes a kind of living, stochastic process involving many community members, both human and more-than-human (Linn, 2007). This form of participatory design is characterized by organizational models with two key features: 1) many community members are invited to participate, and 2) structure emerges organically out of the process and relationships created by community members. By inviting broad based participation and encouraging individuals to get involved, these kinds of processes have been shown to positively influence individual’s self-esteem and confidence (Hart, 1997). Participating in the construction of ones environment fosters an identity of belonging, which is essential to the individual acquisition of agency and positive social development (Hart, 1997). The way that an environment is designed influences both the symbolic outlook of the people who engage with it as well as their lived behavior (Lasswell & Fox, 1979). The shape of urban lands and the culturally constructed processes that design them have tremendous effect upon human development in the urban arena.

Alexander (1979) theorizes that humans create pattern languages that guide the construction of the built environment. These complex patterns serve to inform the way we order and design all micro and macro elements of the city. In industrial societies, the pattern languages
die (Alexander, 1979). “Instead of being widely shared, the pattern languages which determine how a town gets made become specialized and private” (Alexander, 1979, p. 231-232). People are left feeling unable to design anything and “loose touch with their most elementary intuitions” (Alexander, 1979, p. 233). In industrial societies, the design and development of the built environment has become the sole province of architects and planners. Without a shared language to root them in the feelings of those who live there, these professionals become “prisoners of the absurd and special languages which they have made in private” (Alexander, 1979, p. 233). As living pattern languages crumble, new structures and ways of building emerge. We can think of these structures not as a barrier or constraint to action, but as recursively involved in its production (Pile, 1996). “Recursiveness describes the way in which actors reproduce the systems of communication, power, and sanction by routinely drawing on existing structures of signification, domination, and legitimation” (Pile, 1996, p. 57). As commonly shared pattern languages die, institutionally guarded private languages grow more enshrined in the physical and psychological construction of the city, influencing the ways people think and act.

It is important to recognize the essential duality of structure and agency. The ways we construct and structure the built environments in which we live have profound implications for the actions we take in living (Pile, 1996). Investigating the relationship between play and place, Hart (1976) found that children are constantly engaging with and shaping their environments. Hart’s work suggests that the process of shaping one’s personal world is essential to the development of: healthy identity, self-confidence, and personal order. Through toy play children rework and assimilate existing personal knowledge of the macro environment and process
emotional conflict through the application of personally crafted symbols. Through imagination and creative interaction with place, humans develop the capacity to navigate between personal subjective experiences and the physical objective reality we all share. “It is to this space in the imagination that we all go whenever we wish to be creative, to see the world afresh” (Hart, 1976, p. 8). Hart’s investigations show that our ability to find and make places for ourselves is essential to healthy development and growth. An ability to creatively work with and adapt one’s built environment is an essential aspect of living a fulfilling and healthy life.

The landscapes we inhabit play important roles in structuring behavior and shaping social conduct. In many cities in the developed world, urban design separates communities from essential place based patterns, giving great power to a small, globalized, and professional elite. Our urban spaces are culturally rooted in a “lineage of robber barons, from feudal landlords to multinational corporations, [who] began to enclose the commons by force in order to profit from the land” (Linn, 2005). Implicitly, this motivation still drives much urban design. Participatory planning and community co-design are rare and marginalized activities, yet have vast and well documented potential for individual and community development. The interdependent nature of structure and agency is often overlooked. Urban dwellers prefer to think of the concrete monoliths that make up our cities as inert and passive forms with little influence in our daily lives. Such a passive understanding neglects the truth that structures play an important role in reproducing existing social power relations and shaping individual action and agency.

Learning
The increasingly globalized nature of education has further displaced many people from relationship with their home place (Smith & Gruenwald, 2004). The institution of state schooling has proven remarkably effective at epistemological homogenization and the creation of a global monoculture defined by the centralizing patterns of power discussed above (Gruenwald, 2004). The translation from learning to schooling has created a kind of enclosure of human development, as more of what each person must know is forced upon him or her by others (Illich, 1973). “The transformation of learning into education paralyzes man’s poetic ability, his power to endow the world with his personal meaning” (Illich, 1973, p.60). Our native proclivity to learn is being wrested from us, replaced by an institution designed to create laborers and consumers (Smith & Gruenwald, 2004). Gruenwald (2004) suggests that a critical pedagogy of place, in which learning is grounded in concrete experiences, can help foster the decolonization of minds and cultures and a re-inhabitation of home. Re-establishing learning as a dynamic process fed by a person’s lived experience of place is increasingly recognized as crucially important to the human capacity for creativity, emotional development, empathy, and appreciation of diversity (Orr, 1994; Gruenwald, 2004; Illich, 1973; Bowers, 2011).

State controlled schooling has wrested us from a deep and personal experience of learning. The de-contextualization of all knowledge has created a culture of education that is subservient to a self-interested manipulation of the tools of science (Illich, 1973). From a young age, people are coerced into thinking that knowledge and learning are something given to them, from an often invisible knowledge base rooted in the tools of science. We do not trust in a young person’s own ability to self-actualize, to conduct their own learning, and pursue their own
interests (Carla Bergman³, personal communication). “To trust children we must first learn to trust ourselves…and most of us were taught as children that we could not be trusted” (Holt, 1964, p.xii-xiii). The lack of trust in both ourselves and each other has created a society that eschews personal experiences of transformation in favor of institutionally structured norms (Abram, 2011; Illich, 1973). We have knowledge instead of learning (Jenkenson, 2012).

**Experience and Place Identity**

The way we experience place has been and continues to be influenced by many of the factors discussed above: from the historical and continued enclosure of the commons, to the modern design and construction of the built landscape, to the ways we learn. The accumulation of all of these influences has created a modern condition of detachment from place. To be from nowhere is a quintessentially American condition (Jenkinson, 2012). The predominance of Cartesian rationalism as a tool of centralized power holders has expanded a mythic objectivity to blinding proportions (Illich, 1973), to the point where we no longer trust our senses to tell us the truth (Abram, 2011). Professional prescriptions have replaced subjective intuition. When it comes to the weather, we’re more likely to look it up online than step outside. Having relegated all decisions to highly trained professionals, we’ve lost contact with our place. This is not a trivial separation: “Significant knowledge is knowledge of the unique places our lives inhabit; failure to know these places is to remain in a disturbing sort of ignorance” (Gruenwald, 2004, ...

³ Carla is a community artist, writer and organizer who lives with her partner and two unschooling kids in east vancouver, unceded Coast Salish Territories. She is the director of the Purple Thistle Centre and a maker of zines.
p.143). Failing to connect with the landscapes of our lives inhibits healthy human development (Bratman et al., 2012).

Massey (2004) has theorized a geography of responsibility to highlight how place, identity, and personal responsibility relate to issues of social and ecological justice. She suggests the need for a large-scale resubjectivation, beginning with the recognition that meaning and identity are constructed dialogically, in a place. We must recover agency in our relationship to place in order to confront the increasingly globalizing force of centralized power holders.

Eschewing the view that neoliberal capitalism and globalization are somehow “up there” and beyond the territory of the local, Massey confirms the local as the necessary place of all globalization. Nothing can exist nowhere, all centralizing power holders have places of residence that must be confronted in local places, not in a globalized non-place. For Massey, the re-connection with an embodied and context specific experience of one’s place is a key foundation upon which to build a vibrant and healthy resistance to pervasive systems of oppression and injustice.

Chatterton (2010) imagines such a resubjectification in his idea of the urban impossible. Realizing this idea “demands a much wider political imaginary to intervene in the unfolding story of the city” (Chatterton, 2010, p.234). By shifting the focus, “the agenda becomes not so much about what the city currently is or what it was, but more about what it could become, what it has never been” (Chatterton, 2010, p.234). The demand for a much wider imagination creates the vision of the urban impossible as a creative story telling written by diverse cultural and social groups. The writing of such a story is scrawled not on blank pages in a book, but on the
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

unfolding landscape dynamics that house urban communities. Creatively asserting our right to the city, Chatterton calls us towards a collective re-imagination of what could be. “The unfinished city, then, constantly has properties that are emergent, in a process of becoming and it is in these spaces of emergence that innovation and new models for change flourish” (Chatterton, 2010, p.237). As diverse communities step into these spaces of emergence and continue the processes of innovation and change, they can write alternative chapters in the city’s story.

Writing of the radical imagination, Coulthard (2010) explicates the centrality of place in Dene culture. For Coulthard, a connection to one’s place is essential to the construction of personal and community relationships.

Seen in this light, it is a profound misunderstanding to think of land or place as simply some material object of profound importance to Indigenous cultures (although it is this too); instead it ought to be understood as a field of “relationships of things to each other.” Place is a way of knowing, experiencing, and relating with the world – and these ways of knowing often guide forms of resistance to power relations that threaten to erase or destroy our senses of place. (Coulthard, 2010, p.79)

Indigenous understandings of the connections and relationships embodied within one’s place are central to the critique of colonial relations of force and command, and also provide an inspiring vision of a post-colonial relationship rooted in reciprocity and mutual respect.

American Indians hold their lands – places – as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind. Whereas most Western societies, by contrast, tend to derive meaning from the world in historical/developmental
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

terms, thereby placing time as the narrative of central importance. (Coulthard, 2010, p.79)

Creating places as the central reference point for human development and cultural construction invites the many others who inhabit Dene homes to participate in the evolution of Dene cultural life. Such an invitation promotes and supports a reciprocal, interdependent understanding of relationship, which honors the Dene’s integral dependence upon a massive network of living and non-living beings. Each and every aspect of the Dene’s home is essentially involved in giving life to the Dene people who live there. To show proper respect, all of these others are welcomed and considered in all decision making.

Most urban environments are deeply enmeshed in centralized systems of control. As these patterns are recursively cast through generations of physical and social development, many urbanites have become blinded to the perversion of agency and the centralization of power that has come to characterize city life (Gaventa, 2006). Our identities as human beings are importantly wrapped up in the way things are. Confronting the nature of our relationship to place can become a destabilizing proposition, one that may force us to challenge our personal values and identities as human beings. In confronting some of the narcissistic problems that can arise from an identity hitched to culturally appropriate symbols, Randall (2012) suggests it is vitally important to open dialogue and support people in just acknowledging the existential conflicts that may emerge when we begin to dream the urban impossible. The resubjectification of agency will require individuals to let important parts of themselves die in order to emerge as fully empowered adults (Jenkinson, 2012). In bringing about radical shifts in the way we relate to
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

place, and each other, “creating forums that feel personal, supportive, participatory and respectful” may be the most important first step (Randall, 2012, p.9).
Chapter 3: Methodology

My approach to inquiry is rooted in the organization of the Purple Thistle garden. This methodological miming has necessitated an evolving approach, which takes insights from a variety of places in order to construct a process oriented, emergent form of inquiry. Finding methods that reflect the organization of the garden collective, rather than relying upon a specific discipline’s approach, provides access to a much larger workshop of tools for analysis than would have been accessible to me were I to define this inquiry narrowly within one academic tradition. In this section, I will make explicit: the foundations of my approach, how I sought to honour these foundations, the process that brought me to the question under study, and the ways in which I explored this question.

Foundations

Over three years working in the Purple Thistle garden, I came to understand that the organizational space at the Thistle is founded in three basic tenets, which 1) provoke participants to stay open, 2) to recognize that it’s the process that matters, and 3) to trust each other and themselves. My personal experience has been affirmed in this inquiry through conversation with others involved in the project; for instance, Shawn describes “the open nature of participation” as essential to his experience in the garden. This openness creates an organizational environment in which individuals can come and go, but also where individuals can change and grow. As people, plants, and animals come, go, and grow through the project, there is an abiding commitment to the importance of process. Wolf (research participant) confirms that “it’s not about progress, it’s about process.” This understanding holds participants to see themselves as present in the moment
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

– not striving towards some ideal future but working together in the here and now to create the space they want. Indiana explains how this causes participants to “trust that other people are going to come in and put themselves into it” fully and honestly. Inspired by this presence, the project “originates in the community of people it’s meant to serve” (Wolf). By inviting participation without the structure of politics or clear pre-determined objectives, the organization of the garden naturally emerges to support the needs and desires of those who participate. Wolf’s understanding that the process is more important than the product is reflected by nature – order is emergent and evolves in harmony with shifting social, cultural, and physical realities. What emerges at the Thistle is a form of “organizing where trust is implied by the structure, because the structure wouldn’t work without trust” (Bee).

This study has been deeply inspired by this open, process oriented, and trust centered perspective. Throughout the period of data collection, I sought to remain open to who would participate in the study; participants were invited through project wide listserves and word of mouth to contribute in several places and times (Jeremijenko, n.d.). This enabled a more comprehensive diversity of perspectives to weigh in on this study than a more closed research design would have allowed. I also worked very hard to remain open to change throughout the inquiry. I worked to track my own changing attitudes and beliefs throughout the study, and also tried to understand and record how participants were changing over the course of the study. Through reflective journaling, interviews, and reflective discussions I worked to stay aware of and open to the changing perspectives of all those involved in this study.
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

As will be described in more detail shortly, this inquiry emerged out of a terrifically broad interest, and an understanding that the research focus would evolve alongside the process of inquiry (Jeremijenko, n.d.). I had to trust that as I began to explore participants’ experience of the garden project, the inquiry would focus to reflect the perspective of participants (Montero, 2000). This approach honored the importance of process, and was based in the trust that each individual would participate as honestly and truthfully as possible to help focus my research question. The process of coming to the research question was integrally tied up in answering it. It was indeed the process of inquiry that was of most importance to the findings of this study – the destination (if I have arrived at one at all) is simply a reflection upon this process.

In surrendering to a study that emerged through a process of inquiry, rather than beginning a study with a fixed and pre-determined research question, I have had to surrender to trust in both others and myself. I have had to trust myself as a researcher to honestly and deeply investigate my own perceptions and bias’s throughout the process of inquiry (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). This led me to uncover 5 key epistemological assumptions that I have made in this study, which are detailed in Appendix D. By asking broad, open-ended questions and listening very carefully (both to myself and to others), I have followed a line of inquiry born of my own curiosity in relation to the honest reflections of research participants. In my relationships with participants, as well as in my own personal reflections, I have been careful not to assume that one’s words and feelings reflect an objective, absolute truth. Following Hollway and Jefferson (2008), I recognize that we humans are defended subjects who necessarily possess multiple, potentially contradictory meanings and emotions that will color and distort responses.
In life, we feel, do, and say things to uphold or develop a specific identity. Essentially, this identity and the actions we make to secure it are constructions created out of our individual psyches. As a result, the way we act is more rooted in these constructions than in a definable absolute truth. My action as a researcher and the ways that participant’s respond can be understood as a dance in which we both carry significant self constructs. These constructs inform the way we react to one another. As a researcher I have had to trust my ability to navigate these nuances in order to surface, as close to possible, the true nature of the experience under study. Recognizing people as defended subjects is to be aware that these invisible yet potent personal identities manipulate the way we are (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008).

Methodology

With the foundations of my inquiry now explicit, I can move on to outline the methods used to arrive at and then explore my primary research question: how participation in a food commons may influence participant’s engagement in the urban landscape? This entire study emerged from an interest in the experience of being involved in a food commons. I wanted to know how does place impact who we are – with a specific focus on the impact of urban food commons. As this interest was primarily connected to participant’s experience, a phenomenologically inspired research design seemed the most appropriate way to uncover what it is like to be involved in a food commons (in this case, in the Purple Thistle garden). I wanted my study to also be supported by some adapted elements of participatory action research (PAR), which would allow me to include research participants’ ideas in decisions about the study’s direction (Montero, 2000); this would allow me to honor the process oriented approach discussed
above. An adapted PAR model was used to focus the research question as the study progressed, in order to inquire more deeply into the most prevalent patterns of communication and engagement that emerge out of participation in the project (Montero, 2000).

**Data Collection and Focusing the Research Question**

On July 29th, 2012, I conducted brief pilot interviews of seven people who were actively involved in work in the Purple Thistle garden. These people ranged in age from 16 to 32, and had participated in the project from six months to two years. Twelve participants were emailed an invitation to participate in these preliminary interviews. These 12 were selected for their range in age and experience with the project. Primarily, the decision of who to include in these early interviews was made to represent people I was familiar with, after being involved with the project for three years, and for whom I had an email address. Those I knew were people who had been involved in some significant way with the project. Some people I knew but did not have contact information for, and so they were mostly excluded (although one person became involved after I ran into her in the garden). In order to maintain the trustworthiness of the study, I consciously worked to bracket my own notions of who would make the best research participant for all interviews, focusing solely upon the selection of people who would represent a range of age and experience with the project.

In the initial July interviews, participants were asked broad, open-ended questions in a biographical-interpretive interview method (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). I piloted the interview method at this time, in order to make both the research participants and myself more comfortable with the process. The main idea driving the biographical-interpretive approach is “that there is a
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

Gestalt ... informing each person's life which it is the job of biographers to elicit intact, and not destroy through following their own concerns” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p.34). The participant’s Gestalt is their whole sense of the topic; it consists of the patterns of thought with which they see the project (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Hollway and Jefferson developed the biographical-interpretive method as a way of supporting researchers in drawing out the truth of participants’ lived experience of the world, which arise from a combination of the research subject's: previous experiences in the world, physical, social, and cultural contexts, and their own inner worlds. The drawing out of a research subject's Gestalt requires a psychosocial approach which recognizes that the “research subject cannot be known except through another subject; in this case, the researcher” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p.4). I used this form of interview throughout this study.

In the first pilot interviews, open-ended questions were posed to participants, in order to elicit stories about their experience of involvement with the project. At this stage in the research, my focus was very broad; I wanted to explore the relationships we make with place, how they shape the way we understand the world, and ourselves within it. To adequately inquire into such a broad, existential exploration is far beyond the scope of this project – again I kept my lens open, trusting in a process that would allow participants’ responses and insights to direct my inquiry and interest and focus the research question. The interviews themselves were semi-structured (see Appendix A). These initial interviews lasted from nine to 37 minutes. Field notes were taken during and directly after the interviews, which were conducted over two days in two different locations. One day of interviews was performed in a public park, the other during a
workparty in the Purple Thistle Gardens, and during this day I also participated in work in the garden. During my time working with participants in the garden, I took field notes of our interactions in the space.

All of the preliminary interviews were transcribed. From these transcriptions, I identified relevant statements that relate to my research question, highlighting all seemingly relevant responses, which were then grouped into “meaning units” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). These meaning units were then tested across all seven interviews, in an exploration to see if some participants contradicted or disagreed on specific meaning units. Those meanings that were common to at least five of seven participants were taken to be strong themes in the research, and were thus organized with brief descriptions of each (See Appendix B). Descriptions were provided by text taken directly from participant interviews.

After the preliminary interviews, I became curious about how involvement in the garden project influenced participants’ experience of oppression in the city. It seemed that this project had opened participants to perceive the urban landscape differently, and empowered them to question, challenge, and/or confront the way that some urban spaces serve to reproduce dominant power relationships that oppress and exclude. I was growing more interested in how the city is built to preserve power relations. I wondered about geographies of exclusion (Sibley, 1995). With a focus that was still too broad to fit the constraints of a masters thesis project, I trusted that participant narratives would continue to help more tightly narrow my research question(s), as they already had begun to do.
Having gained some new curiosity and developed some preliminary themes, I returned to the Purple Thistle Guerilla Gardeners monthly group potluck on October 2nd, 2012, to present the common themes from my initial interviews and ask some more open questions⁴. This group dialogue was facilitated by Metta Patterson. Metta has experience with anti-oppression and inclusive facilitation techniques and is not otherwise involved with the Purple Thistle or this research study. The inclusion of this outside facilitator was meant to ensure that my own notions and experiences did not unduly influence participants. Gardeners were openly invited to participate in this group meeting. There were two people at the potluck who had never been to the garden before, another three who had participated in the preliminary interviews, and two more who had been key leaders in the project’s evolution, but did not participate in the initial interviews. After almost two hours of discussion on other topics, including the threat of the gardens demolition for a new city highway, Metta and I were given the floor to begin the session, which we had planned to last for 45 minutes. We ended up talking as a group for more than an hour. Our plan for this meeting is outlined in detail in Appendix B. During and right after this group meeting, I took notes feverishly – trying to document what was said but also observing group dynamics, and changes in others and myself. The process inspired me to hone my research question further. This is when my research focus became clear! I realized what I wanted to ask: how may participation in a food commons influence participants’ engagement in the urban landscape?

⁴ The Purple Thistle Guerilla Gardeners host a monthly potluck. The potluck is intended to bring together everyone working on various garden related subprojects, called “pods.”
All of the conversations from this group meeting (and every interview) were digitally recorded and transcribed by me shortly after the meeting. I wrote much in my notebooks at this stage, and worked to pull key themes or meaning units and an overall Gestalt from the meeting notes, while being careful to analyze and understand my own motivations and experiences in relation to the study (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). After mind mapping, writing, color coding, and re-reading all transcripts from both the preliminary interviews and the group meeting, I started to feel more connected to some of the important experiences of involvement in the Thistle project (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). I grew curious about these experiences, and the ways different participants related to them. It was from this curiosity that I developed the questions (Appendix C) for the third and final individual interviews, which I would conduct in early December with ten participants. Of these ten people, six participated in the first interview. Of the four new people, two participated in the group meeting. Two new participants entered the study in these final, intensive interviews, because they had been significantly involved in the garden through the years of its existence and were interested in participating in my study. All participants agreed to participate anonymously in this study, and so their names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Throughout data collection, I worked to ensure that divergent perspectives were not lost, and that common themes were more deeply explored. I often included interesting dialogue from previous meetings in later interviews with research participants, to more deeply probe and assess how people are experiencing their involvement with the Purple Thistle Guerilla Garden project (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Throughout the study, I also gathered a number of writings from
participants in the Purple Thistle Guerilla Garden project. These writings were pulled from: a personal blog site, a project blog site, and two public articles written by people involved in the project. Other data gathered included: my own field notes and observations from interviews and participation in the garden, over 200 photos from three years of gardening on site, historical records from the University of British Columbia and the Vancouver Archives, zoning and land use maps, aerial photos from six decades, reflections from sitting in the garden in every season, as well as my own journal entries from my years of involvement as a member of the Purple Thistle Guerilla Garden project. All of this data will be used to help triangulate and/or arrive at some research findings.

Validity

To achieve an understanding of each participant’s *Gestalt*, a researcher requires the tools of subtle analysis and intuition (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Subtlety and intuition are incredibly difficult concepts to pin down, but are essential in coming to understand the way people make meaning and identify with place.

The perception of meaning as I see it, more specifically boils down to becoming aware of a possibility against the background of reality or, to express it in plain words, to becoming aware of *what can be done* about a given situation. (Frankl, 1984)

In exploring how people are making meaning out of their experience of involvement with the Purple Thistle garden project, this study is designed to explore potential new possibilities for urban design and education. This study’s validity is therefore rooted in its ability to highlight if
(and perhaps how) critical engagement with a place opens possibilities for alternate realities to emerge. Its challenge is to invite others to consider whether or not these alternate realities are worthy of further exploration and development. This study was undertaken in an effort to provide clues into what can be done about urban places to make them more empowering learning environments. It also lays out a method by which its findings can be further explored and tested in similar urban contexts.

**Data Analysis**

In order to investigate the meaning frames of participants involved in the Purple Thistle Guerilla Garden project, I had to develop a picture of each participant's *Gestalt*. This required more than subtlety and intuition (though these two tools were valuable!). Borrowing from the method developed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), I created a two-page “pen portrait” of each participant. After sitting with all the data collected from a participant, I read it through carefully and took notes and highlighted significant pieces as a way of amassing descriptive detail. With these notes and my own experience of deeply engaging with the material, I then wrote a two page pen portrait, as a way of making the person come alive (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In this activity I sought to explore contradictory aspects of participants’ experience and better understand each participant and the ways each is related to the project (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). The task of writing each pen portrait helped form clear images of each participant in relationship to the research context and provided an interesting platform to continue my analysis.
After writing the pen portraits of each participant, I re-read all interview transcripts, highlighting key themes and interesting conflicts and commonalities in the data. I made many journal entries during this time, and began constructing mind maps and models of the experience of involvement in the Purple Thistle garden (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). During this time, I also looked over hundreds of photos of the project’s emergence, and selected several dozen pictures that were hung for display in a local café. I re-read all participant writings as well, trying to fully immerse myself in the data I had gathered.

I found in reviewing all of my data that I had two basic types of information, which I called form and pattern. Data that fit the description of form was information relatively free from interpretation. The interview transcripts, the physical place of the garden (as depicted in photographs), and my own personal feelings as described in journal entries were all formative pieces of data that could be described as primary sources of information. In my data there was also a second kind of information, which I thought of as pattern. This patterned information included: the pen portraits of research participants, research participants’ writings, changes in the physical place of the garden, and changes in both participants’ and my own feelings. Categorizing data in this way, I was able to compare pieces of information in order to find similarities and differences that helped to illuminate, problematize, and partially answer my research question. While participants’ interviews always held a central role in data analysis, the rich collection of different forms of data helped corroborate, validate, and deepen my analysis. The ability to check key findings against different sources of information, and to be inspired to
think about the patterns and connections across the entire project, was essential to arriving at a rich, detailed account of involvement in the Purple Thistle garden.

As my analysis deepened, I kept comparing the themes that I had identified after each of the three key interviews. These themes were mapped alongside the common and contradictory narrative descriptions of participant experience. Mapping all of the data with an eye to align interesting narratives with common themes, I began to grow more attuned to the ways involvement in the Purple Thistle garden influenced participants’ engagement with the urban landscape.
Chapter 4: Analysis

The community of people at the Purple Thistle garden have always identified their practices as a departure from traditional urban reality. Their work is a creative exploration in the co-creation of a new urban landscape. While everyone who participates gathers to grow food, there is an ever present and palpable energy that radiates from the project. In Jayne’s words, “we’re not just growing plants, we’re changing the community.” Her assertion is partnered with a fierce conviction, one that is shared broadly within the community; “this doesn’t have to be an industrial wasteland.” At the Thistle, participants share a vision that the urban landscape is less a concrete certainty than it is an emerging possibility. The garden presents fields of possibilities that nourish and are nourished by participants. The experiential learning of alternative ways to structure and relate to the urban landscape catalyzes a new awareness of one’s self in relation to place. This chapter highlights how participating in the Purple Thistle Guerilla Garden influenced participants’ investments in the urban landscape.

The chapter is divided into three main sections, which are organized to reflect some of the dominant narratives that emerged from the series of three interviews conducted in this study. In the first section, *The Emergence of Order*, I discuss how the structure of the Thistle’s organization influences participants’ experience of trust and belonging. In the second section, *A New Perspective on Place*, I discuss how engaging in the garden inspires participants to perceive the urban landscape in a new way. In the final section, *Connected to the True Source*, I highlight how participation in the Thistle garden shifts participants’ psychological and physical relationship to the things upon which they depend.
Embedded within each section are several recurrent themes. Listed in Table 1, these themes consistently surfaced in dialogue with participants as important parts of the experience of working in the Thistle garden. As this chapter unfolds, I will show the importance of these themes in relation to participants’ experience in the Thistle garden. What fascinates me about these themes is that participating in the garden changes the way that people understand and engage with each. These transformations, while deeply personal, are common among many participants and have significant implications for the ways each person engages with the urban landscape. Understanding these transformations helps answer how participation in an urban food commons influences people’s engagement with the urban landscape.

Table 1

*Ten Key Themes that Emerge from Participation in the Thistle Garden*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Highlights of Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Trust               | • People see each other as complex, whole beings;  
|                     | • Learn to listen deeply;  
|                     | • Invest in the process, not the product.                                                                                                             |
| Emergent Structure  | • Nature as a “way of assembling political order without due process” (Latour, as cited in Jeremijenko, n.d.);  
|                     | • Organization emerges order naturally, through process of social succession;  
|                     | • Humans and more-than-human others participate in the creation of social and political order.                                                        |
| Resistance to “Rat Race” | • Desire to pull self out of (or keep self from falling into) cycle of accumulation and scarcity;  
|                     | • Promotes a critical engagement with existing economic and social organization and a desire for alternative means for acquiring needs.         |
| Inclusion           | • More-than-human others given intrinsic value and are considered in decision making;  
|                     | • Abandon claim over control – allow process and others to influence trajectory.                                                                    |
Fear and Scarcity
- Fear of scarcity reduced;
- Perception of abundance and connection increased;
- Social scarcity connected to need for economic abundance.

Historicity
- Respect for the layered historical contexts that undergird all activity;
- Appreciation for those who came before.

Curiosity
- Project inspires individual curiosity;
- Drives learning - people follow their curiosity and slowly learn from it.

Connection
- Meta theme, which covers all others;
- Increased desire to connect meaningfully to others and self.
- More aware of the connections that make life possible (interdependence).

Dependence
- Break dependence on central power to provide individual needs;
- Draw dependence close to you, to meet needs locally;
- Exposes the myth of independence, as we are always dependent on something;
- Increase community networks to support one another.

Creativity
- Encouraged to repurpose old things;
- Untangling connections to central power opens door to creatively engaging in alternative ways of living.
- Collaborating with others opens new forms of creativity.

The Emergence of Order

Participants unanimously agree that the organizational structure of the Thistle is very important to the experience of being involved in the garden. This structure was briefly described in the previous chapter as one focused on openness, process, and trust. For Wolf,

The ability to have a sense of structure and a sense of . . . of uh . . . um . . . kind of like tools and frameworks to work with to construct your own education, or, or to, to conduct your own learning, and to have a supportive community around that, like that’s completely invaluable.

The guiding principles of the Thistle organization create a sense of structure that multiple participants found to be personally empowering. Bee describes this structure as one “in which folks are encouraged just to make decisions about what is going to go where and what’s going to
be planted where.” Bee explains that the open, trusting nature of the Thistle “is like really like positive and empowering for a lot of people and that wouldn’t be possible without this kind of like trust that everybody involved has the interest of the garden as a whole and everyone involved in mind.” Bee points out that “trust is implied by the structure, because the structure wouldn’t work without trust.” The narrative of an open, inclusive organization defined by trust is a strong thread that runs throughout participant dialogue. Order and organization at the Thistle emerge out of a diverse collaboration between all those who participate in the Thistle garden. The collective organization is essentially the foundation upon which all experience develops. In this section I highlight: the emergent nature of this organization, how it impacts participants’ learning experiences, and the radical inclusivity this engenders. This is shown to have profound implications for the ways participants engage with each other and the larger urban landscape.

The emergent nature of organization. The Purple Thistle was created to allow young people to do the things that make them happiest – to truly thrive. From its inception, it has eschewed hierarchy of any kind and worked aggressively to promote and support people to feel empowered to creatively imagine and create the organization and structure that will support them in manifesting their truest happiness. Drake, one of the founders of the Purple Thistle, explains the origins of the organizational model at the Thistle:

We’d try to find mentors and we’d try to find supplies and then I was fundraising and you know it just went bit to bit to bit but the organizing principle was that, I was like, OK, well so I was like [to the people who were organizing the Thistle’s first painting group], you guys are doing the painting group, you just fuckin, that’s your deal. You run it, you
organize it, that’s your little pod. So like, call, we kinda call it like total trust or total responsibility, right. You got the keys you organize that shit, you figure it all out, and then just report back to the collective.

This kind of organizational model, in which participants are given the responsibility to carry the specific projects they are interested in, continues to be the guiding motivation behind the structure at the Thistle. Within the garden, specific participants are given total responsibility over different aspects of the garden or site that they are particularly interested in. For example, pods have emerged to help manage specific aspects of the garden, including: irrigation, flowers, brassicas, composting, and wetland remediation; the people who engage in organizing each pod are relatively independent and are given total trust for their pod. What emerges is an anarchic order defined by trust in each other. There is a guiding faith that each member of the community will follow their passions and interests toward mutually beneficial ends. Participating within a community based on such radical faith causes many people to re-invest in their relationships and focus upon those connections in the city that promote or allow for a model of total trust. Being given responsibility over an area of personal interest empowers people to deeply engage that interest. For the community to function well, pods must communicate important information to the larger collective when appropriate. When this communication and empowerment is lacking in other relationships in the city, participants feel less desire to engage. They come to expect trust in interactions and eschew relationships that are not collaborative and trust centered. This causes a significant influence on the way participants engage in the urban landscape, as will be further discussed below.
Impact on learning. The total trust model encourages participants to take responsibility for their own learning in a supportive, nurturing environment. The ability to follow one’s own interest and curiosity is coupled with a community of supportive people with diverse knowledges and interests. Adalbert found it to be “really informal and horizontal and just really welcoming and friendly, so it’s been very easy for me to learn.” He finds that “people have made themselves very accessible to me for questions and, so, yes. It’s been really easy and really enjoyable learning experience.” Filip explains the learning process as rooted in

The concept of ownership of a task, or project, and that, um, I don’t really need somebody to tell me how or what to do, so much as like I need to learn, and, um, so I can learn those things by failing and understanding how I failed and then the next time like treating it with a little more respect and care.

Filip goes on,

I would say that the structure of, of like a relatively high level of autonomy really, um, imparted a sense of, uh, um, of like, self responsibility. And, and I think in time if I was to, you know, continue doing things like that, I would develop a confidence in my ability to be autonomous, to be responsible and careful, um, in a way that I wasn’t ever really taught to be when I was a cog in the machine.

Filip and Adalbert’s experiences confirm Wolf’s assertion that the Thistle provides the frameworks or tools to construct your own learning. The communication and support that arises between participants, as well as the autonomy given to people interested in specific tasks, creates
a structure in which participants are inspired to learn for themselves. Wolf describes the structure in the following way:

It’s an open source convivial kind of tool that’s supportive of a number of different kinds of ways of living, forms of production, ways of interacting, ways of communicating . . . can be repurposed in any direction, very low energy input. Very little, very little in the way of bureaucratic systems like that, but it’s still a very political space, a very engaged space, a very active space. Lots of different people using it.

The trusting nature of the Thistle’s organization is an essential motivator for the kinds of learning experiences that Filip and Adalbert describe. The organization of the Thistle is based in an understanding that it should support and promote people coming to find their own passions and happiness. Participating within a convivial organization gives participants the tools and experiences to enable them to conduct their own learning and come into contact with their true passions. In the Thistle garden this kind of empowerment invites participants to become engaged in the collective re-imagining of the urban landscape and empowers them to see their ability to become involved in writing the urban impossible. The flexibility of the organization to accommodate alternative ideas or interests, via the creation of new pods, as well as the consistent engagement and communication across pods and the expectation that everyone will work collaboratively towards mutually beneficial ends, creates an incredibly supportive and inspiring environment. This environment inspires participants to see that they have meaningful contributions to make.
Radical inclusion. The Thistle’s organizational structure also invites a much broader diversity of participation than would a traditional allotment garden, where individuals rent out their own individual plots and work autonomously on their own independent parcels. There are virtually no expectations placed upon people interested in participating, and so anybody can get involved without worry. Indiana explains the importance of inclusion in the garden’s structure:

It’s hard to like be a young person and just be like, ya, I’m going to start gardening. I’m going to commit to it. And like, with many programs, educational programs through schools, or, um, like, if I wanted to get a community garden plot, I would have to have a certain amount of time and energy and sometimes money, dedicated to that, whereas. And for me that freaks me out. I don’t like that. I don’t like having to be like (sigh) I don’t know, going to something deciding that this is something that I’m going to be doing for like the next however many, X amount of time. Ummm, with the Thistle gardens it was like, ya, show up, come when you want, there’s like, if you don’t come for, like, a month, if you decide never to come again, that’s like totally awesome, like, we appreciate all the time and energy that you.. that you’ve, like, given here, and, that’s, like, all.

There’s no expectation. And because there’s no expectation, I felt like really free.

The inclusivity of the Thistle garden is an important enabler that gives many people without privileged access to the time, money, or energy needed to garden an opportunity to get involved. This ensures that everyone is able to access and take advantage of the unique experience of participating in the Thistle garden. It also ensures that a diversity of perspectives are included in the evolving organization. Explaining his experience of being involved in the Thistle garden
Wolf says “you start to realize that it’s not about you as an individual, it’s about the connections that you’re making with the life around you and trusting their perspective too.” This ability to trust is key to the inclusive nature of the Thistle.

The garden’s organizational structure invites many involved to express themselves freely and to follow their own interests and curiosity. The way that gardeners perceive others, as well as themselves, begins to shift as a result. This inspires Kim to engage with others in a new kind of way.

Feel(s) like working in the garden I can like um, embrace like the whole like whoever it is, I can embrace their whole like personality. Like it’s part of their work, it’s showing their work, who they are, and I like, sometimes I can be very judgmental but I found working in the garden I feel to be able to accept things more.

Working alongside other people in a setting of total trust, Kim is able to more completely engage with those around her and begin to fully appreciate them as “whole.” The ability to appreciate the complexity of those around you seems an important element in developing lasting, mutually beneficial relationships rooted in trust. The ability to see others as complex, whole beings, and to trust them to communicate their needs clearly and honestly, invites compassion and healthy relationships to emerge more strongly in participants’ lives. This influence trickles over into the way participants engage with others (human and non-human) in the city, and helps inspire a new relationship to the built landscape. Participants felt a stronger desire to connect with others to help shape and direct the future development of the city of Vancouver and began living lives more rooted in communities that are creatively imagining the urban impossible.
At the Thistle garden, it’s not just the people who direct the project’s organization. The place itself and the multiple others who live there also engage people and play a role in the collective construction of the project. Kim explains,

I do have a feeling of like, both a feeling of I somehow own it with other people and vise versa, that the place actually owns me. Ya, um. I don’t know if you ever read Le Petit Prince? There’s a part where the prince talks with the fox and how being friendships mean that they are friendship, the approach is like the Prince is going to tame the fox but the fox actually says if you tame me that means that I tame you. So it’s like the same feeling with the garden, it’s like I own it but at the same time it owns me, and that’s something very, um, that I actually don’t really feel since I came to Canada so it’s, uh, it’s actually something very, uh, ya personal.

In this short narrative, Kim expresses how the Thistle garden has domesticated her to a form of wildness. The garden and its profusion of plants, animals, fungi, and bacteria have bled into Kim’s life so much so that these many more-than-human others now help direct her actions and motivations. The organizational structure of the garden thrives when the kinds of intimate relationships that Kim speaks of are allowed to blossom. The wilder others become important flagships that direct and motivate the entire organization. While the people involved in the Thistle garden direct and shape the organization of the project, the garden itself is equally implicated in the project’s direction. Asking whether the garden owns the people or the people own the garden is unfair — they each participate in the organization’s evolution. These relationships can only form in an environment of total trust, where participants allow themselves
to completely embrace all of the relationships that encompass their experience of the garden.

Kim’s experience is one in which space is alive with interaction and communication, where she is situated within diverse fields of communication, all of which are rooted in trust. This experience has multiple implications for the way Kim invests in the urban landscape, and the way she thinks about place.

An organization built implicitly in trust changes the way participants engage in relationships to others and the environment. Participating within an environment of trust, Filip recognizes,

People really appreciate me for who I am, um, and… And, and ya, we trust each other to be true to our word, to be respectful, and, um, ya, I feel like in other situations I, I’ve felt less trusting, or less willing to invest in relationships with my peers.

As a result, Filip has “learnt how important it was to take care of others … and to really respect their, their own needs, and understand my needs.” This learning inspires participants to engage a compassionate approach to both others and themselves. The Thistle invites participants to take ownership over their work and to learn from their mistakes. Becoming accountable to your self and recognizing that you are the agent of your own development empowers people to see that everyone has the ability to meaningfully contribute to the evolution of the city.

A New Perspective on Place

Participating in the garden influences participants’ idea of what the city is, and what it can be. Gardeners begin to see the potential of the city to sustain and support diverse forms of life; the city itself emerges as a living and breathing other whose life is intimately tied up with
their own. Participants grow attuned to many subtle cues in the urban landscape, using them to shape their decisions in and interaction with the city. The urban landscape becomes unfixed and participants come to see their right to participate in the city’s evolving structure. In this section I will highlight four different ways in which participants come to see the urban landscape differently, as latent with knowledge.

More than the human world. Recall Kim’s story of becoming domesticated by the garden’s wild others – “it’s like I own it but at the same time it owns me.” Participants not only notice the existence of more-than-human others in the city, they begin to incorporate them into their community. Participants take notice of animals, plants, fungi, and bacteria and look for subtle clues about how they are doing, how they are changing, and how external influences are impacting them. In at least a metaphorical sense, these others go from being static statues to complicated friends. These friends begin providing information about the health of relationships in specific places, and the larger community. Being involved in the Thistle garden invites people to begin communicating with the more-than-human world. What participants come to see often challenges the structures of the existing urban landscape, as this group dialogue illustrates:

Wolf: I think another thing about seeds and plants that’s really compelling and appealing to me is that they tell us that we’re absolutely not alone, or that we’re not that important, or that, they tell us a many number of things like that. I spend a lot of time talking to plants. . .directly. . . and indirectly. And listening closely. And. . .I think, it’s incredibly sad. . . to, to not know that you can do that [laugh].

Metta: Right.
Indiana: [quiet] yyaaaaaa

Wolf: And I think it’s incredibly lonely.

Indiana: mmmm

Wolf: And I think that that’s like the inspiration, in many ways, for me, just that I can find endless fascination and endless conversation and endless mystery, and. . . and endless inspiration in life, and in living and dying and breathing and growing. And, there is no boredom. There is no. . . there is no malintent. There is no sense that human beings are the epitome of evolution or that evolution ever stopped.

Indiana: Ya!

Metta: So it sounds like you’ve found, like, an ability to deeply listen. Is that true?

Wolf: Absolutely

Metta: And, um. And, um.

Wolf: It makes you want to vomit when you’re listening to something that’s not pretty [laughter]

Metta: hmmm, right. And also, this idea of, of connection. Between everything and everyone. Like, you mentioned malintent. But, with the awareness that we’re all connected, then malintent, sort of, doesn’t exist.

Wolf: Ya

Metta: Is that what you were talking about?

Wolf: I guess what I was driving at is simply that we’ve been taught to see the environment as hostile and as human beings we’ve essentially been taught to follow a
linear course of analysis that says blah blah blah we’re the end of evolution, everything else is made for us, therefore, we’re supposed to use it as we see fit, and that translates for using as much of it as possible, and that translates to extinction, for everything and everyone. Like, it’s written in. We all know that that’s, that’s what we’re doing.

Metta: That sort of mentality?

Wolf: Ya, the power over mentality. And it has that end. I don’t think, if you were to talk to anyone, that at some point if you were to deconstruct them enough that they would disagree with you that that is the logical conclusion

Indiana: Yup

Wolf: of our goals, is, is extinction. Is, is the complete destruction of diversity.

Indiana: mhm

Wolf: And it’s a really sad thing because we don’t realize that consciously most of the time. That that’s a lot of what our grand society is working for. But I think that’s the truth.

This interaction demonstrates that participating in the garden project teaches participants to deeply listen to the more-than-human others that live with them. What emerges from this learning is a deep awareness of connection. “It’s like joining hands in a dance” (Wolf). Opening to other more-than-human beings in the city exposes “the power over mentality” of much of urban design, which in Wolf’s words privileges “a linear course of analysis” that drives “the complete destruction of diversity.” Becoming attuned to the subtle rhythms of the more-than-human world, knowing that you can talk to plants, creates a fundamental shift in the way people
engage with the urban landscape. The capacity to communicate with multiple others instills an abiding trust in the natural world. Through this lens, the concrete industrialism of the modern city is viewed not as an inevitable step in human progress but as a gross perversion of natural relationships. Participants begin to appreciate how much of the urban landscape is constructed and controlled by a minority of people, who are exercising “the power over mentality” that Metta refers to. Participants are especially concerned with the exclusion of many diverse forms of life from participation within the urban environment. Bee explains that “it’s eye opening for people in terms of, um, the fact that different ways of supporting yourself are possible.” Participants begin to feel that the concrete industrialism of the modern city is an old and destructive framework in need of adjustment. They want to both make space for multiple others in the city, but also encourage their needs to be considered in the evolving construction of the built environment. Shawn describes existing reality succinctly: “We do seem to have gotten rid of a lot of stuff in favor of wide roads.”

As participants grow more attuned to the more-than-human world, they begin to engage more in landscapes that support the health and wellbeing of many others. The ability to respectfully listen to and engage the natural world forces many participants to abandon static notions of the way things are, were, or ought to be. Wolf speaks about how this abandonment is an important precursor to developing a personal framework rooted in trust; “we are a culture full of people trying to make our lives happen.” For Wolf coming to trust requires us to recognize instead that “our lives are constantly happening.” Individuals must hold pre-conceived ideas loosely in order to truly and deeply listen. Cultural, social, and personal constructs so often
undergird an individual’s engagement with the world. Coming to see and communicate with the more-than-human world within an urban environment loosens the constructs people hold and enables participants to develop an increasingly rare ability to deeply listen. Instead of holding on to firm ideas of what should be or how things are, participants let go and embrace the understanding that their life is happening now, and it’s best to listen carefully and be open to possibilities.

Rhythms of abundance and scarcity. The urban environment is one of much diversity and noise. In Vancouver, the sometimes overwhelming amount of stimulation is contrasted by a pervasive feeling of isolation and loneliness (Vancouver Foundation, 2012). Learning to navigate between the constant throng of human activity and the personal need for close social connection is an essential skill to the cultivation of a healthy lifestyle in the city. As stated in an anonymous participant brainstorm, “How to harness and deflect these flows becomes central to living in harmony and abundance.” This ability to navigate the daily and seasonal flows of people and material into and out of one’s life emerged in this study as an essential element to cultivating a personal framework rooted in abundance, rather than scarcity. The ability to see and navigate these “flows” is another example of how participants’ perception of place is influenced by working in the Thistle garden.

For Julia, the seasonal transience of the garden worked to inhibit her engagement in the Thistle garden: “My involvement was sort of checkered.” Julia goes on to explain:

There is a gap in the summer where, there was like not many people there for quite a few weeks in a row, so, and for me, I think I like having people there. Like it’s not just nature,
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

its all the people together, so when no one was there things were dwindling, I kind of, like...

Julia faded from involvement over the course of this study. Being able to harness seasonal rhythms and fit them into one’s own personal being in the city is important to supporting healthy engagement with the urban landscape. Julia’s involvement in the garden project is checkered by the inconsistent and transient nature of human flows into and out of the garden. She explains, “the community of people itself is a little transient, and not very consistent.” Julia admits that she struggles to integrate the somewhat chaotic nature of the urban experience, finding herself awash in doubt and uncertainty. Julia bounces between projects a lot in Vancouver, and finds it difficult to cultivate meaningful connections. This seems directly related to her personal association to scarcity.

I like to have a certain amount of, like, financial buffer because I have a certain sense of social insecurity, and scarcity. So, you know, I have close friends, but they’re in Squamish and Halifax and Victoria. And my family’s a bit, like my immediate family, is a bit scattered, except for my aunts, so I don’t really have. So. And, you know, I do meet, people. And I live with people but it’s sort of, um... doesn’t really feel.. that’s been a bit transient too, so it’s sort of, not wanting to depend too much on anybody and also feeling that I need to be able to look after myself, you know, and so, I think, ya. Ya. So then the money kicks into it for me, I guess. Ya. But I don’t feel like, um.. but that isn’t really what I want, you know. It’s not really.. who I want to be. That’s how I feel it is in this city right now.
Julia’s difficulty integrating the flow and rhythm of city life seems to push her into a feeling of social insecurity. This causes her to accumulate financial security as a buffer, which she admits to being unfulfilling. The intensity of city life can be overwhelming, and it seems to have pushed Julia to retreat into financial security, where she is disempowered and unwilling to participate in the evolving idea of the city, which negatively impacts her engagement with the built environment. Julia explains how you can get

Sort of stuck in this thinking of putting money as your primary source of sustenance …

For me I still feel kinda caught in that and I, um.. I believe that, the relationships that are, um, of primary importance. Relationships with people, with the environment and stuff like that, and valuing those is, is much more crucial to health. Money can be functioning within that, but money itself is not really our path. Um, but, it’s sort of like the, um, survival relationships, you know, that you have while your in the system, keep going, are fed through money, so it’s, you know. I’m not really. I’m still trying to figure out how, how I’m going to make that work.

Julia wants to engage differently in her relation to the urban landscape but finds herself stuck in a private, survival relationship characterized by feelings of social scarcity, transience, and a dependence upon financial security.

Julia’s story contrasts with many other participants’ experience. Adalbert feels the project has had a strongly positive impact in his life, opening him to a feeling of abundance. “I think as, helping people with isolation and loneliness, um at least to a certain extent, I think it has, sort of, sort of tied me down in a good way to this place and this project.” For Adalbert there is no
difficulty with the transience of participation. He sees it as “just a really good way to spend all of my free time as a home schooling teenager.” Adalbert describes what it’s like to work with others in the garden: “You know these people personally and you can trust them and you can see their faces and you know that they’re working for the same goals you are. So it’s, j’, pretty easy to just trust them and to work together.” Adalbert feels very little need to invest his energies in financial security. “I have been a home-schooled minor all my life, so I haven’t really been in the rat race!” The ability to divest ones self of the burden of securing a financial buffer seems important for many participants’ ability to navigate the chaotic flows of the urban environment.

Individual’s ability to manage the ebb and flow of social life in the city is important to becoming truly connected to community initiative. The ebbs and flows of people and things into and out of one’s life are important pieces of information that, if navigated effectively, can spur a shift in the way participants’ engage with the urban landscape. Instead of a landscape built to promote individual financial security and protection from scarcity, people learn to work towards landscapes of social cohesion and abundance. In the Thistle garden, this happens for participants who are able to establish strong, lasting relationships amidst a constantly shifting, transient community of people. Having a place like the Thistle garden to work alongside people and collectively decide upon the landscape’s design supports and encourages many participants in learning how to integrate and navigate the complex flows present in city life. This leads people to an appreciation of their own ability to shape and influence the evolution of the urban landscape.
Multifunctional landscapes. Engaging in the Thistle garden demonstrates how multiple uses can be made of different elements in every locale. The appreciation of multifunctionality is therefore a third way in which participants’ perception of place shifts as a result of involvement in the garden. Participants begin to see that specific places have a broad range of uses, which can be utilized by both human and non-human others. They perceive complex meaning in the ways many others interact with each other and with the places they inhabit. Participants begin to welcome a diversity of types of engagement with any one place. As Jayne notes:

We have people who aren’t part of the garden and they walk through the garden and like, I’ve gone past there before and seen people like having a picnic in the corner, like I didn’t know who they were, they were just people who live nearby and who are enjoying the garden and it’s totally acceptable and, like, we had some residents there for a while. You know the garden was there and the water tap came and suddenly there was a, there was a motor home or a trailer, I think it was a trailer there and people hanging out with pots and I think they even had a fire pit (laughs). And that was totally welcome and it was actually really beneficial for the garden ‘cause they were keeping an eye on it, keeping it from getting trashed, which would happen sometimes. And that was just the reality of the garden, and the thing is the garden is for everyone, even the people who want to trash it.

Participation in the Thistle garden increases participants’ perception of the wide variety of others who use every place. All of these uses are accepted. Participants learn to trust that all uses of a place have a purpose and meaning.
Participants also understand that some places enable specific cultural uses while others promote unhealthy relationships; there is an understanding that scars on the land can become scars in the cultural and individual consciousness of those who inhabit it. Jayne shares, “When you’re in a place that’s all concrete and all industry and it looks dirty and it’s smelly and it just, you know, you’re surrounded by barbed wire fence right now [laughs], it’s just really really hard on your morale. And there’s something about plants that give life.” Sitting within the Purple Thistle garden, Jayne is reflecting here on the difference between the surrounding landscape and the landscape created by the Purple Thistle garden. One is dominated by concrete and barbed wire, the other by biological diversity. The stark difference in aesthetics at the Purple Thistle highlights how the landscape influences individuals. Landscapes that contain little diversity, such as the one next door the Thistle (see Figure 1), are less inclusive of cultural and individual diversities and can be detrimental to many of those landscape’s inhabitants. By including others in a stark, industrial landscape, participants grow attuned to the understanding that “plants give life” (Jayne). Spending time working in the Purple Thistle’s food forest (see Figure 2), participants come to see how many different ways an abundant, healthy place can be used and enjoyed in comparison to landscapes like that pictured in Figure 1.

Coming to this awareness has impacted the way Indiana perceives the urban landscape. She explains:

Connecting more with the gardens, brings out a sort of, like curiosity in a person, and, ya the more connected you feel to the land the more you feel it. So, like, now I see that my,
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

*Figure 1.* The Aesthetic of the Neighborhood Surrounding the Thistle Garden.

*Figure 2.* The Purple Thistle Food Forest, Summer 2012.
like, that, the place that I’m in has totally expanded. So, like, for example, rather than like, going somewhere directly very fast, I like walk everywhere and I take different paths in the city and I just, like, go at the pace I wanna go at and like, look at things and follow that curiosity and I don’t feel pressure in the sense of, like, time.

By working collaboratively with many others in the Purple Thistle garden, Indiana is enraptured by the multiple uses of each place she passes through. This promotes a curiosity and desire to learn how she can participate with a diverse multitude to create functional landscapes that enable multiple uses to peacefully co-exist. She elaborates:

When you create something together with a group of people and when you put, um, that creation above your own personal, like, egos and desires, you create something very very beautiful and you learn from it, so like, we’re gardening but we’re not gardening in a way that is, dictating, like, how the plants should grow. We’re trying to learn from the plants by the relationships that they developed with each other and also, with us, so that everyone can be mutually benefited.

Indiana’s story highlights how participating within the Purple Thistle garden can open participants to understanding that every place (and every plant) is used in multiple ways. Coming to learn from and encourage the many uses of any one place influences the way participants engage with the urban landscape, as they begin to perceive and encourage multifunctional landscapes all over the city. The knowledge that every place can be used in many ways, and that some places have multiple beneficial functions, while others are relatively impoverished, is an important realization that causes many participants to see new pieces of knowledge in many
urban landscapes. Participants desire to promote more multifunctional landscapes that can creatively connect human and more-than-human life in an urban context. They begin to desire urban landscapes that always provide multiple functions to the entire biotic community (i.e., urban food forests), and grow to disdain landscapes that provide very few functions (i.e., concrete parking lots).

**Layered history of place.** At the Purple Thistle participants become sensitive to the complexly layered history of place. They recognize each place is not a momentary occurrence, but is steeped in layers of history. Being involved in the garden inspires a deeper interest in and sensitivity to this history. Coming to see the historical contexts implicit in every place is the fourth and final way that participants’ perspective on place is impacted by their experience in the garden. As Drake describes it,

You gotta be clear on what we’re standing beside and who we’re standing with, what kinda ground. Most of us, myself included, have a very facile understanding of what’s goin’ on. What’s been around here for millennia and millennia. That’s really important to me, to figure that out with some perspective.

This desire to understand the historical context within which we are situated can also push participants to investigate their own personal histories. For Wolf, this brings to the surface some troubling personal realities:

I identify with not being able to return home to my native birth-place because there is no one waiting there to welcome me back. I have no connections. And never having lived in even a single state or country for, like, a period longer than seven years, like, I come from
a place of literally feeling. . like uh. Like a complete, what does Bob Dylan say, a complete unknown? A rolling stone (laugh). Right? And I think that’s a lot of us. Um, and I think this [the garden] helps, helped a, helped a lot in some ways and it still like rubbed it in even more. It hurts.

This experience of historicity influences the ways participants engage with the city. Their awareness of self in relationship extends back in time as well as out in space. All of a sudden (or gradually) participants see themselves as not only tied in connection to others in physical space, but also back through time. This awareness of connection leaves some participants adrift in an experience of historicity that is deeply rooted in colonization. For others, this historical awareness calls new appreciation to buried childhood experiences or an increased curiosity towards one’s ancestors. What seems true for everyone is that the connection through time catalyzes an awareness of one’s engagement with history. People see that much of the urban landscape was built by a specific historical tradition.

Drake talks about how he’s “been thinking about what decolonization looks like” [emphasis added]. For him, the Thistle garden is an important experiment in decolonization, one that eschews the public/private dichotomy that dominates our relationship to place. As Drake sees,

Colonization has got its tentacles into every part of our fucking fabric: how we think, how we understand the city, how we understand what we’re supposed to be doin’ here. Um, it’s, it’s got its tentacles right in us. And so to think, to pull that out, is not a simple process either theoretically or practically or emotionally.
Drake goes on to discuss how,

We need to think about land in other ways... The concretization in both, in law and in, uh, and in everyday understanding of how the city looks is built around notions of private property. And as soon as you start to unravel that a little bit, that shit gets really interesting.

For Drake, the Thistle garden is an experiment in how to think about property, among other things. Being involved in maintaining and using a public commons shifts one’s relationship to the complexly interwoven tentacles of colonization and challenges the historical notions of private ownership.

As Drake explains, unraveling oneself from the tentacles of colonization requires “disassembling the features of our culture and our society that enabled us to do that. That seems like a much broader project and one that, you know, I think that rightfully should freak a lot of us out.” By us, Drake is of course referring to those of us from a European settler heritage. Wolf includes himself in this generalization. In his words above we catch a glimpse of why an altered engagement with one’s historicity might be a scary thing. Citing Bob Dylan, Wolf reminds us that with no connection home, it is easy to become a complete unknown.

**Connected to the True Source**

Working in the Thistle garden, participants became rooted in and responsible to that upon which they depend. Table 2 highlights some of the ways in which the Thistle shifts the source of some common needs. As Indiana describes it, participants became connected to “the true source” of their livelihood. People came to see this essential dependence as an inevitable part of being
alive; everyone is dependent upon a variety of others to sustain and nourish their life. In an open letter of goodbye to the Purple Thistle garden, Wolf meditates on the word depend:

Stemming from the Latin root “pend,” or to hang, to depend is to hang from. Pendulous is our grip on life and on language. In the culture of our continent (North America or Turtle Island?) and in our shared language (English or American?) – from which, lest we forget, a great many of our convictions and actions depend – this word, depend, is the subject of no small confusion. Between the Declaration of Independence, our revilement of all forms of dependency, and our increasing dependence upon a globalized system, we have a real pickle. Or perhaps it is just a personal pickle, as exemplified by my mother’s recent characterization of me as a very dependent child. I had up until this point considered myself and seen myself regarded as an intolerably independent individual. As a student and practitioner of fermentation, a pickle like this has understandably earned my admiration and bewilderment.

The more participants engage with the culture of the Purple Thistle garden, the more these multiple understandings of dependence become contextualized within specific cultural paradigms. What becomes clear, in Wolf’s words, is “a conviction that to be free is to acknowledge, name, respect, praise, and steward that on which one depends.” What we are doing at the Purple Thistle, Wolf contends, is that “we are building a net, a community, a web for ourselves, a web that reeks of relationships, relationships created by needs, surpluses, radical generosity, and mutual aid.” Participating in the Thistle garden, participants begin to depend more upon this net as the true source of their livelihood. In conversation, Indiana and Wolf
highlight how planting food in the garden can shift individuals’ psychological dependence upon a centralized food system.

Table 2

_Influence on Participants’ Experience of Dependence_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Before Thistle</th>
<th>After Working in Thistle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Grocery store</td>
<td>Thistle garden, sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The living city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform</td>
<td>National media</td>
<td>Clothing swaps, free box, thrift stores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>Department stores</td>
<td>Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Job</td>
<td>Social security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Financial security</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Ecology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indiana: And you learn from the ground, also. Just, like seeing a tiny little seed. Like the whole concept of like having a seed grow into something huge, and then like, that you can eat [all laugh] and it like, gives you life. Like that’s crazy, that’s a crazy thing. And seeds are planted all the time, so, that’s pretty huge.

Wolf: Ya it is. It’s just the act of taking yourself out of the rat race.

Indiana: Ya!

In this discussion the rat race emerges as a centralizing force that provides for people’s needs without connecting them to the source of their livelihood. Stepping out of the rat race is to see,

Things that are seemingly self reliant, things that seemingly make you independent, really just draw your dependencies close to you, and allow you to speak with them and allow you to recognize them, and allow you to return to them, and allow you to tend them, and
have a relationship with them. So, in many ways, doing things that are seemingly, you know, free me, actually bind me closer to the elements of my life. (Wolf)

Coming into contact with the source of one’s dependence is a profoundly empowering experience. As Filip explains, the Thistle garden is “a really valuable place because it’s like, oh, I can come and be in this environment and this is what it feels like” to be disconnected from the so-called “rat race.” It’s “an opportunity to practice this kind of slowing down” (Filip). While participants are unable, in most cases, to completely sever their material dependence upon central power holders, a profound psychological shift occurs. “Suddenly you’re out of it [the rat race], and then helping empower your friends and other people to do that. I think it’s just like the simplest distinction, but it is huge” (Wolf). Very quickly participants are able to disentangle themselves from a psychological dependence upon others to provide. For Indiana, “that source of life has shifted from, like, grocery stores, to, like, the earth. And so, that has, like, fundamentally changed the way that I live.” Connecting to the true source of one’s livelihood has lasting implications for the ways participants engage with the urban landscape. In the next sections, I will highlight how this influences participants’: personal agency, inspirations, and passions.

**Personal Agency.** Participating in the Thistle garden puts participants in direct contact with the some of the sources of their own dependence. Coming to recognize one’s dependence upon a multitude of others often inspires a sense of personal agency. As people begin to see that their lives are essentially intertwined with a plethora of others, they feel capable of creatively engaging these others in a dance of mutual aid. Many participants express an ability to engage more, and identify an increased sense of personal empowerment as a result of being involved in
the Thistle garden. Adalbert explains, “I think it’s helping me grow into a less anxiety ridden person, especially about just like handling things.” Adalbert recognizes that “I’ve been more aware that I do have perspectives on these, um, things [work in the garden], that can be helpful.” The Thistle garden has connected Adalbert to his own personal ability to take an active role in meeting his own needs, be they for food or direction on how to do specific tasks. Jayne further reveals the influence that the Thistle garden has on participants’ sense of agency, explaining how many people in Vancouver,

[f]eel like they don’t have anything to offer. And I felt like that too, before I got involved with the garden. Um, but I was like, you know, maybe I don’t feel like I have much to offer but, I have a lot to learn. So maybe I’m just going to go and learn. So I kind of overcame that and went and found that I actually do have stuff to offer because I have my own, like, base of knowledge that other people don’t have and I have my own set of experiences that other people don’t have.

For Adalbert, being involved in the garden has,

Made me realize that I’d like to take more of an active role in, hmm, say, just, uh, organizations that I’m, like, involved with. Ah, I’ve, I felt I’ve really hung back from, ah, taking, like, taking any sort of responsibility or sort of, administrative role because, I don’t know I just feel nervous about, about failing, ya, and having it, ya, on me, n, letting, oth, o, other people down. But yes, um, I think it’s made me realize that I’d like to try to get out of my shell and take on, and take on some of those roles.
Both Adalbert and Jayne now see that they do have important things to offer their community. This psychological shift was precipitated when each found the courage to step away from an insular notion of independence. Finding themselves bound in relationships of mutual dependence allowed each to recognize that they did not need others to fill specific roles but that they could actually step up and fill these roles themselves. Both became able to trust a community to support them, and became empowered to act themselves as a result. As they became aware that they were more dependent upon a community, rather than an invisible global economy, they became empowered to engage proactively in that community to help provide for the things upon which they depend. Connecting to these dependencies, both gained a sense of social security and an ability to overcome feelings of anxiety and isolation. They started to see themselves as a contributing part of a larger ecology of interactions, rather than as an isolated unit within a global economy.

**Inspiration.** Another important aspect in the shift in psychological dependence away from central power holders is the inspiration that alternative life paths are possible within one’s existing personal context. Participants often grew to understand that much of what they depended upon could actually be procured in their existing life, rather than in some idealized dream world. Filip’s experience is informative here:

Part of my awareness has come to be that I don’t need a whole lot to be happy, from a materials stand point. And, um, and having spent a lot of the last three years that didn’t involve me paying rent, um, that, that’s a, in terms of living in the city, that’s what really gets people committed to working to pay the bills. There’s been an emphasis on
relationships, um…. And making connections with, uh, with folks who are growing food locally. And producing, not just food but all of the things that I need, you know, whether it’s clothes, or art, or music, other consumable, um, and so, sort of, I had this idea, sort of a romantic idea, that I wanted to, um, find an eco-village to go live at or some sort of like permaculture like community, and what I understand is that it’s possible to create elements of that in a city environment as well. So the Thistle is one, or kind of maybe covers several aspects of that. It’s not the same as an eco-village, but there’s some elements in commons and so that there is that project around sort of helped me to, um, stay with the idea that, um, you know, I can, bit by bit, keep increasing these kinds of aspects in my current life that let me live in line with my values and not feel like I have to pursue this alternative, romanticized, um, life that I don’t really know much about at this point, and that probably would require me to have some money to invest, um, .. so ya, I think in a way it does, it helps remind me of my awareness and it also keeps me from getting back into the rat race.

Here we see that the project has inspired Filip to recognize that shifting his dependence away from central power holders is possible within his existing situation. The Thistle garden has helped him cultivate alternative ways to meet his needs within the city limits. This understanding encourages a shift in the way Filip engages with the urban landscape, inspiring him to promote and support interactions and structures that produce the food, clothing, art, music, and other needs he has within a framework that is localized and in line with his values. Filip has come to realize that he is not dependent upon a job and financial security to meet his needs, but that he
can cultivate relationships and build a life in the city that is fulfilling and whole without, as he says, “getting back into the rat race” and without escaping to some romanticized pastoralism. This understanding pushes participants to more deeply engage with the urban landscape and to recognize that it *can* be constructed in a way that reflects participants’ values and life paths. Instead of *hoping* for some idealized vision, participants begin to *engage* differently in the place where they live.

**Passion.** Disentangling one’s self from a psychological dependence upon others to provide also inspires many participants to find new passions in life. That is, as participants come to see how they are related in complex systems of mutual dependence, they learn how they can situate themselves within this system in a way that promotes and supports their own passions. Kim explains, “Everything about working in the garden is like kind of aligned with what I am and what my interest is and what my beliefs are and um. Um, so, ya, I think I’m just going to keep going with it and I think it will result in something fruitful.” Kim has truly found her passion through participation in the garden. Searching for the words to explain what they’ve found in the garden, Indiana says,

> Well I guess it’s like a clear understanding of like, mmm, my… of like … I don’t… role is kind of a weird word to use, because it’s like … it’s kind of almost too defined… but, it’s like, my ability to connect with people. And to inspire. And to… support and like *create together*, I guess is like, the biggest thing.

Shortly, Indiana continues,
so it’s like, how can I help people learn to love each other? It’s not like tolerate each other, it’s like, no! We’re all here and we have, we all share the same like passion, and then, we all want the same things, so how do we learn from each other and how do we grow to appreciate each other, and then how do we grow to love each other? And, like, those are things that you learn here. You learn from the gardens for sure.

As participants “draw their dependencies close” (Wolf) and sever psychological dependence on central power to provide, the way they engage with the urban landscape fundamentally shifts. They begin to see themselves as bound up in complex webs of interdependence and mutual-aid. This experience exposes people to the ways in which they can work together with a community of others to “create together,” as Indiana puts it. Learning from one another, participants slowly grow more in tune with their own personal passions, and how those can be followed to maximum benefit. One result is that participants become much more engaged in the evolution of urban design. Disentangling their ties to central power leads people to find agency, inspiration, and passion in their lives. This encourages participants to engage not as passive observers in the unfolding story of the city, but as active agents in its constant becoming.

Not only do participants want to be involved themselves in creating the urban landscape, they actively want to invite others to join in community networks to shape the urban neighborhoods in which they live. Through these networks, participants work to creatively meet their needs locally. The invitation for other’s participation is sought not just for other people, but for the entire biotic community. This inclusiveness becomes an important aspect of place making and feeling invested in the city as one’s home. “It’s about something much bigger and it’s about
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

being a part of something together right, and uh with, with things like plants and bees and, you know, other people in the city, and um, insects and probably little animals, trees, and food” (Julia). Participants begin to engage in aspects of the urban landscape that allow them to promote or support such radical inclusion. They seek to alter and disengage their energy from the many landscapes that fail to comprehensively include a community of others.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Participating in the Purple Thistle garden has had numerous impacts upon the people who work there. Consistent engagement in the garden inspires many people to see the urban landscape anew. Growing and harvesting plants in the garden connects participants to the true source of their dependence, while the emergent nature of organization in the garden shifts people’s understanding of relationship and learning. In this final chapter, I explore the implications of these findings and propose how this research might be utilized to promote community participation in urban design and education. This study suggests that the enclosure movement, though massively successful in the developed western world, is neither complete nor endlessly beneficial. By re-imagining the way we design and plan our cities we can inspire new ways to learn in and experience the urban environment. As we saw in the preceding chapter, these alternatives can have profound implications for individual and community connectivity, agency, and empowerment. In the following pages, I explore how to best utilize these findings to creatively re-imagine the urban impossible. This exploration problematizes the dominant paradigm of land ownership, asking us to explore alternatives to the dichotomy between public and private ownership. Place and home appear as much as ideas as they do tangible constructs, and this section offers new ways to approach these ideas in urban design and education in a way that can empower more participatory urban construction.

This section is structured to mirror the literature review in chapter 2. I have designed this in order to utilize and advance the dialogue and theory presented there. In light of the analysis presented in chapter 4, I would like to revisit the key topics presented in the literature review to
suggest how this study’s findings can be used to propel and develop a new, emergent urbanism. In the first section of this chapter, *The Commons*, I will discuss the idea of open source landscapes (Kelhammer, 2009) and suggest that common lands have the potential to promote new forms of education while decolonizing the systems that provide some of our basic human needs. In the second section, *Urban Design and Planning*, I discuss the challenges and benefits of communities designing their own neighborhoods and suggest ways to empower people to access their democratic right to the city. In the third section, *Learning and Education*, I discuss the role that educational institutions play in connecting students to their community and place, arguing that commons gardens can play powerful roles in expanding the learning experience beyond the walls of the institution. In the final section, *Experience and Place Identity*, I explore what this study says about the modern urban experience and what we can learn from participants’ experience in the Purple Thistle garden. I conclude with the conviction that food producing commons in urban areas have massive potential to promote and support a diversification and flourishing of the modern sustainability movement.

**The Commons**

The enclosure movement began in Great Britain as a way to dispose the poor and consolidate wealth in the coffers of the rich. Its success solidified the idea of private land ownership and characterized the modern urban ethos. Katz (2008) suggests that human identity and belonging are pervaded by new forms of enclosure, which often create desires and promote consumption through instantaneous spectacles with little or no connection through time or space. “The spectacle embodies, carries, and obscures the social relations of production, but it also
reduces the thing itself and its possession to appearance” (Katz, 2008, p.556). Individuals themselves are being reduced in this way; identities are increasingly created through (social) media images and new forms of communication that rely heavily on spectacle. As this enclosure of identity further pervades the urban consciousness, individuals and communities lose touch with a sense of historicity and place; they are disconnected and independent.

In East Vancouver, Oliver Kelhammer has spearheaded a number of places he describes as open source landscapes (2009). These places are commons built on marginal urban land, where community members are invited to participate in the development and evolution of the space. Several of Oliver’s projects have grown to become hubs of community connection years after he left. The Purple Thistle gardens are inspired by a similar kind of emergent organization, which hopes to foster many stages of social and ecological succession in the garden over time. We have seen what kind of impact this open structure has on personal and group agency, inspiration, and learning. The Thistle shows us that creating open source landscapes rooted in “the total trust model” (Drake) can be a profound way to re-connect people to themselves, each other, and the landscapes around them.

The Purple Thistle serves a fairly unique and thin slice of the urban population. It is geared towards youth, and attracts many people within counter-culture movements in Vancouver. As a result, the Purple Thistle garden is stewarded by a community comprised largely of people from this demographic. Given the numerous benefits and profound impacts that the garden has upon participants’ engagement with the urban landscape, it seems a worthwhile project to expand the number of food commons and open source landscapes in the urban sphere,
“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”

to enable all neighborhoods and communities access to common land to steward. Placing these commons in or around neighborhood centers would provide multiple communities access to the experience of engaging in and co-creating a community commons. The community garden movement should consider commons as a viable and potentially empowering way to support a greater diversity of people to engage with common lands. The tendency to create community gardens dominated by individual allotment plots owned by individual users ignores the power and import of community commons. Participants in this study described how commons invite greater participation from a larger diversity of people. The necessity of collective organization also makes commons a more socially and culturally rich environment for community engagement. While providing some individual allotments may be desirable, providing open source landscapes where people can produce some of their needs has the capacity to not only produce sustenance for people, but also to create multiple, neighborhood focused ideas of the city within the urban sphere.

Further study of the impact of community food commons in diverse communities would increase our understanding of the ways in which different communities are impacted by engagement in such projects. The Thistle’s explicit focus on youth, arts, and activism draws individuals who are often fiercely critical of cultural and social norms. The garden’s positioning within a stark industrial landscape seems to attract those who desire to critically challenge industrial design and its socio-cultural underpinnings. Studying how food commons are organized and constructed in diverse urban neighborhoods would likely add fascinating layers of depth and complexity to the challenges, successes, and influences that urban food commons have
upon those who participate in them. This study surfaced the integral importance of total trust in the organizational model of the Thistle. Investigating how this kind of trust is established and fostered in diverse communities could provide fascinating insight that may support a steady growth in urban commons. Further action is needed to understand if and how the trust centered organization of the Purple Thistle food commons would influence other communities. This study provides interesting insights and comparators for future action and research.

In addition to neighborhood centers, school grounds and areas near to learning institutions also provide valuable spaces in which community commons could immediately be built and supported. Commons on or near school grounds provide a rich platform for community members from many walks of life to interact with and engage student interests. Schoolyard commons also provide students with a living, tangible project in which they can invest their energies, interests, and learning. While teachers may not have the skills or training to engage students in designing, maintaining, and using a food commons, community members can also be engaged in stewarding the space. This study shows significant benefits to participant learning, motivation, and inspiration are made by giving young people access to common lands to steward. These insights further support a growing movement to re-connect students to the land and the source of their food through schoolyard greening and food production (Orr, 1994; Smith & Gruenwald, 2004). Further action research to establish trust centered commons organizations on school grounds could yield fascinating and fruitful results.

Beyond supporting the one-off installment of visible food commons throughout the urban landscape, this study challenges us to re-consider the purpose of the city. Supporting and
promoting a proliferation of urban commons may be a powerful way to instill what Massey (2004) calls a *geography of responsibility*. At the Purple Thistle, enabling people to grow some of their own food, medicine, and fiber on common lands created a profound shift in the way participants thought about the urban landscape. These shifts inspired people to realize the local nature of all production, supporting Massey’s view that there is no globalized no-place, but only a connected fabric of places. By aligning people with the source of their dependence, food commons have a profound ability to alter commonly held ideas about the purpose of the city. The colonized thinking that has defined much of urban design no longer appears inevitable or fixed. In urban commons, places recover their contextual, interdependent nature as complex fields from which life is drawn. The webs of interaction that provide for all life can slowly be brought back into the city. As people work together to provide for more of their own needs, colonized relationships to centralized power holders wane, and new place based understandings of community and self can emerge.

As humanity pushes ever harder upon the ecological fabric of planet earth, urban communities worldwide are searching for strategies for “sustainability.” While the resurrection of common lands for the provisioning of local needs may never be able to produce all of a city’s sustenance, the influence of engagement in a food commons is significant. By promoting a reappraisal of the urban landscape and opening people to new ways of interacting with the built environment, food commons should be understood as fertile grounds for the imagination of the urban impossible. What the sustainability movement desperately needs are new ideas that can lead to new ways of interacting. Engaging more people in the influential experience of working
in a food commons will bring to light diverse and unique ideas of the future city. More important than ideas, such action requires people to become engaged in re-creating their neighborhoods and communities in ways that align with the needs and desires of local people. Supporting food commons can bring people back into collaborative communication with their place and the historical arc upon which it stands. By working together where we are, we can create sustainable communities.

Before moving on to the next section, I would like to point out a few limitations that need to be addressed if the discussion of the commons above is to yield fruitful results. A first limitation is that not all communities are as interested in stewarding common lands as is the community of youth who surround the Purple Thistle. Such spaces must be spearheaded and supported by communities themselves if they are to be successful and some communities do not seem very eager to participate in this kind of participatory planning and action. As demand for more sustainable ways of living grows, more and more communities are supporting and encouraging local food production and urban greening. Such momentum can coalesce to create new and unique food commons. Policy makers, activists, planners, community gardeners, and others should be careful not to follow tired forms of engagement and consultation in creating community commons. We need to be ready to listen and fully support community members creating commons in a community focused, bottom-up approach to design. How to foster and support this kind of participatory, grassroots action to build neighborhood commons through an organization rooted in trust would benefit from further investigation and practice, and is discussed further below. A second limitation is access to suitable land. The promotion of more
food commons requires an ability to let go of the urban land dichotomy of public and private. Public and private lands can be divested to community control, yet there are significant barriers and many personal interests that stand in the way of such a shift. This barrier is significant and could benefit from further investigation and study if it is to be overcome.

**Urban Design and Planning**

The built environment is an essential language, with the ability to influence the ways that people think and act. This study highlights the role that the Purple Thistle food commons plays in shaping participants’ engagement with the urban landscape. It shows us that interested laypeople can design and build urban landscapes, and that the co-creation of urban food commons has multiple influences on the ways participants engage with: the natural world, each other, and the larger urban community. Notions of home place, community, trust, and historicity became more meaningful to participants in this study. The influence of being engaged in the Purple Thistle garden was life altering for many. Being immersed in the garden project promoted a radical shift in the ways people perceived and experienced the urban landscape. Such findings propel me to question the professionalization of urban design and planning. It seems that when people are engaged and interested, they can work together to create their own neighborhoods. Such engagement can promote healthy connections to some of the most essential and important themes in life.

The organic nature of the Thistle organization is emerging into a kind of “patterned language” (Alexander, 1979), which participants use to design their food commons in a collaborative community setting. Centered in notions of trust, inclusion, curiosity, and creativity,
this language has enabled participants to connect with many aspects of the urban environment in new and personally empowering ways. Participants have come to see every place as ripe with knowledge and information, and have been able to connect to the true nature of their (inter)dependence. Yet the pattern language that emerged from the Thistle garden is young and in many ways incomplete. While it has had a real and lasting influence on participants’ investments in the urban landscape, it is not free from error and difficulty. The Thistle garden and the community who steward it are prone to fluctuations in energy, enthusiasm, and commitment. The garden ebbs and flows from relatively beautiful and diverse forms (see Image 4) into poorly cared for and largely dead forms (see Image 5). The truth that the garden does have such powerful influence upon participants despite its relative infancy is informative.

Alexander (1979) suggests that for a truly living pattern language to emerge, it takes many years of invention, adaptation, and use. Having evolved through generations of use, a living pattern language becomes a tool for all community members. Essentially this language becomes owned by the entire community and is used to design the built environment where each unique community lives. While this study suggests some mechanisms through which a pattern language could be re-born, the language of the Thistle remains incomplete and relatively young. The key themes identified at the beginning of chapter 4, in Table 1, may be important building blocks upon which such a language could evolve. The significant achievements in personal and community development already discussed in this study suggest that with more time and development, the emergent structure and associated pattern languages evolving from the Thistle project could grow to become important tools to imagine a new urban reality. More study and
exploration of how to harness the foundational themes discussed in this study to promote a pattern language for building urban spaces could yield fascinating results. Support for the Thistle project itself to continue to grow, fail, and learn also seems essential for the crafting of such alternative pattern languages. After making short-term gains, projects like the Thistle garden need space to explore and develop into long lasting models of design. I can only imagine the profound insights and impacts that such a project could have if it were to exist for generations.

While the Thistle dabbles in the early days of creating a living pattern language, much of urban reality is constructed by private languages that are written and controlled by a tiny professional elite. This study’s findings highlight the multiple benefits that can accrue by inviting both humans and more-than-human others into the design process, to collaboratively co-create their shared urban reality. It also draws attention to the profoundly alienating and disconnected nature of modern urban reality. The propagation of an urban core defined by colonial notions of place has constructed the urban experience as one of independence. Before being involved in the Purple Thistle garden, participants in this study were shielded from the ecological, social, and historical connections that sustained their life. Their experience in the city was fundamentally impoverished. Coming into contact with the garden was a profound experience of connection, juxtaposed against an urban backdrop so heavily cloaked in notions of independence.

The recursive nature of structure and agency – wherein the way things are structured influence and are influenced by the actions we take – makes it challenging to engage diverse communities in food commons. The built landscape that comprises much of urban reality creates an environment in which it is difficult to engage people in action towards participatory design
processes. As Pile (1996) notes, the existing structures of urban reality continue to shape people’s action, behaviour, and experience in the city. While this makes the challenge of growing urban food commons into neighborhood and educational centers that much more difficult, it also highlights the value of the Purple Thistle garden. The simple fact of its existence within an urban landscape dominated by colonial relationships is important. As more people come into contact with the project, more will be influenced to see the urban landscape differently. This can catalyze more people to engage in stewarding new common spaces in the city, furthering the reach and influence of such spaces. The slow growth of community participation and influence could build incrementally, as a snowball down a hill, to become a much larger part of urban reality. Longitudinal studies of communities in which food commons are built would help identify and explore this potential impact.

Figure 3. Parker St Garden, Summer 2012.
Learning and Education

The centralization of control that shapes city design echoes in the halls of urban education. Smith and Gruenwald (2004) point out that the education of today’s youth is increasingly structured by the ideals of neoliberal globalization. Schools are institutions built to promote and support an independent, disconnected view of the world that is defined by the perverse manipulation of the tools of science (Illich, 1973). In order for educators to overcome this perversion, Gruenwald (2004) proposes a pedagogy of place to re-affirm what Massey (2004) called a geography of responsibility. This study supports the importance of such
pedagogy, showing that through consistent, close interaction with a specific place, people are influenced to see and relate to their environment in responsible ways. If educators want to promote and support a society rooted in notions of ecological and social sustainability, they would be well advised to experiment with and develop common grounds upon which learners could explore the key themes discussed in chapter 4. The organizational structure and the nature of participation in the Thistle garden are models upon which a pedagogy of place could be built.

As was mentioned previously, many institutions of education lack the skills and interests necessary for building and sustaining engaging commons on school grounds. It seems the recursive influence of the educational institution has fixed “learning” within the four walls of a classroom. In order to free students to creatively explore their own curiosity and interest, it is helpful to challenge this manipulation of the learning environment. This study suggests that enabling people to creatively adapt and learn from direct engagement in diverse commons has powerful impacts on the learning process. Participating in place based learning opportunities can open people to new, empowering ways of interacting with the built environment. If learning is to become a process that supports sustainable living in the urban environment, it seems worthwhile to explore multiple avenues for opening the walls of the school in a way that allows the local place to infect students’ learning process.

Opening or dissolving the walls of the school to ensure education is rooted in consistent engagement with place allows students to creatively explore the how, what, and why of their learning. Participants in this study explained that working in the Thistle garden pushed them to take responsibility for their own learning. To do good work in the garden required deeply
engaging with each task and seeking to learn not just what to do or how to do it, but also why
that task was important in this time and space. At the Thistle, people are never just told what to
do, but are asked instead to engage in a way that suits their interest, within a community of
support and encouragement. If you ask, what should I do, you will most likely hear what do you
want to do. In Wolf’s words, this led participants to an experience of being able to “construct
their own education” or “conduct their own learning.” As Mezirow (2000) predicts, such
engagement promoted a transformative learning experience for the participants in this study.
This learning experience led the participants in this study towards a more ecological worldview,
defined by interdependence and respect for others.

The organizational structure of the Thistle was a powerful catalyst for promoting this
kind of learning experience and worldview. The trust centered nature of the Thistle organization
also promoted a kind of radical inclusion, in which participants were able to see each other
simply for who they are. This simple yet profound ability to take another at face value, without
judgment or preconceptions, created a learning environment in which people felt able to both
express themselves freely and learn honestly from others. This kind of learning environment,
which seems so simple, is rare and extremely difficult to create. As Kim says, the environment
allowed her to embrace the whole of whoever or whatever she was working with. This ability is
an important first step in coming to truly learn about another. By engaging both the human and
more-than-human others in the garden in this way, participants were able to free themselves from
the same traps of judgement and truly embrace the whole of who they were. Being approached
by others in such an open environment creates the conditions in which people can comfortably
and safely learn new information – information that could cause them to re-frame their own personal identities and accept new knowledges in place of what they previously knew. This understanding of trust-centered and open learning environments could be utilized in environmental education and education for sustainability to foster ecological awareness in urban populations. Opening the field of learning to include participatory community spaces in which many others come into creative, open, and non-judgmental contact in urban food commons is an underutilized way to promote ecological literacy in educational settings. Further work developing and studying the mechanisms that create such learning spaces may prove to be of great benefit to the movement for eco-literacy.

Experience and Place Identity

Before engaging in stewarding the Thistle food commons, many participants in this study shared an experience of the city as a cold, disconnected, and unfriendly place. Many confessed to an enduring sense of placelessness, characterized by feelings of isolation and disconnection. This reality confirms Jenkenson’s (2012) assertion that to be from nowhere is a quintessential experience of modern urban reality. Without a strong understanding of connection in place, it is easy to get caught up in the so-called “rat race.” In such a situation, the power and sanction of a minority of elites can become a dominant, oppressive force, sweeping people into a life of independence where security is conferred through economic, rather than social, means. Participating in the Thistle garden gave many participants the convivial tools to work together to create a sense of connection in place. This experience helped people recover a sense of agency, inspiration, and empowerment and fundamentally altered their identity in relation to place. The
Thistle garden shifts participants’ experience of place from a static ground upon which we walk towards a potent field of interaction and relationship; this is succinctly captured by Kim’s understanding of the garden somehow owning her, while she is responsible to it. The Thistle garden allowed people to see how each element in a place is responsible to another, and how it all works together to create our unique experience of reality.

The ability to perceive place in this way is similar to Coulthard’s (2010) explanation of indigenous notions of place relationship. Coulthard explains how understanding oneself as an “inseparable part of an expansive system of interdependent relations covering the land and animals, past and future generations, as well as other people and communities” (p.82) leads one towards particular systems of values and ethics. “It is this place-based imaginary that serves as the ethical foundation from which many Indigenous people and communities continue to resist and critique the dual imperatives of state sovereignty and capitalist accumulation that constitute our colonial present” (Coulthard, 2010, p.82). The experience of interdependence fostered at the Purple Thistle gardens had a similar effect upon participants. Being involved in the garden caused many participants to begin challenging the notion of state sovereignty, as they desired to reclaim their own democratic right to the city free from state controlled notions of property, ownership, and design. Coming into contact with an experience of interdependence also challenged notions of capitalist accumulation and led all participants to try to live outside of what they called “the rat race,” which was defined by notions of accumulation within a capitalist ethos.
While much work remains to be done to explore and understand ways to decolonize the settler mind, the Thistle project is an interesting experiment in decolonization. Though it lacks significant Indigenous involvement, the project promotes a fierce and critical awareness of the built landscape. The Thistle garden seems to have an ability to resubjectify (Massey, 2004) those who participate there, bringing them back into subject to subject relationships rooted in a local context. Participants in this study testified to the idea that being involved in the garden caused them to experience their personal meaning and identity as constructed dialogically in place. The ability of collaborative, multifunctional landscapes to promote a resubjectification of those who participate is an important finding. It suggests that food commons have the capacity to counteract globalizing forces of neo-liberal capital accumulation, which continue to control many of the systems that provide our essential human needs. While food commons may never provide all of the food we need to survive, they can significantly impact the perceptions of those who use them, opening doors to the relocalization of the source of our dependence. By helping populations come into contact with an understanding of place rooted in interdependence, we create the foundations upon which a new system of values and ethics can be built. With this altered worldview, a new paradigm of dependence can emerge.

More study is needed to determine the extent to which the Thistle organization catalyzed this resubjectification. As previously mentioned, I suspect that the open, trust centered nature of the Thistle project, which enabled all participants to create the project together, in constant and close dialogue, played a significant role in empowering and promoting the identity shifts identified above. I suspect that food commons initiated by outside forces and then placed in
neighborhoods for communities to use would not have the same impact. The fact that participants in this project were directly involved in creating, maintaining, and developing the space may be an important fulcrum that helped tip the project towards a deeper, lasting influence on participants’ experience of place. Future studies that compare the influence of food commons built on different organizational models would help to further develop and deepen our understanding of the role that a food common’s social organization plays in promoting alternative conceptions of place.

This brings up another interesting issue, which this single study could not address. The existing meanings and identities that participants brought into this project must have helped shape and direct the influence that the Thistle project had upon them. Since the Thistle is situated within a community committed to the tenets of radical de-schooling and anti-oppression, the context from which the project began is quite unique. While participants in this study were primarily attracted to participate in the garden because of the garden, and not the politics of the Thistle, the organization does attract a specific kind of person, with a particular identity. I suspect that this context helped inform the strong influence that the food commons had upon people’s engagement with the urban landscape. I believe that the people who chose to involve themselves with the Thistle entered well-primed to be impacted by the project. What this study contributes is an understanding of what makes the organization so engaging and able to influence participants’ investments, as well as a description of some of the most important influences the project had upon participants. It was not the political orientation of the Thistle itself, but the open and trust centered nature of participation that really set the stage for participants’ deep
experience of resubjectification. Given this finding, it would be valuable to test the creation of other food commons projects in other communities of different political orientation. I suspect that if these projects are founded in a participant centered, trust-focused environment, they will have similar impacts upon participant engagement. Finding ways to catalyze this kind of trust centered environment, and inviting people to become engaged in creating their own unique food commons, is another task worthy of further investigation and comment.

Within the urban landscape, there is very little opportunity for people to develop neighborhood scale models that allow anyone to creatively engage with and shape the built environment. There exists an essential and troubling lack of trust. People are very rarely given the ability to creatively engage each other and the many others who inhabit each place. What is truly radical about the Thistle garden is the complete trust it places in everyone who becomes involved in the project. It is a unique example of an urban landscape that truly allows anyone to genuinely participate in its evolution and development. This study suggests that if other food commons are to be successful in opening people to an experience of interdependence, they should strongly consider this open and inclusive approach. Such an approach is not facilitated by a policy or decree. It is a lived experience that emerges from all participants in a project. By working together, in communication and interaction, the themes of this study surfaced. It is important to note that this organization is also not completely free from structure. Organization did evolve at the Thistle. It was an organization that was, as much as possible, decided upon by the collective of beings that worked in the garden. As participation shifted, so did the
organization. Everyone was trusted to participate to the degree they wanted, and the project evolved organically to suit the needs of those engaged.

Both Randall (2012) and Lertzman’s (2008) work suggests that the supportive, participatory, and respectful nature of the Thistle project is essential to enabling people to accept new ways of identifying with place. The alternative worldviews and perceptions that surfaced in this study often oppose or problematize dominant relationships to place. This tension between the dominant paradigm and one’s new perception can be personally destabilizing and cause existential conflicts to emerge for the individual. The existence of a supportive community to listen and support participants was an essential element in enabling people to create new relationships to place. As participants’ identities shifted, they often cited the social structures and support systems of the Thistle organization as important enablers to be able to continue to explore and develop alternative ways of knowing and relating to the city landscape. This finding supports Lertzman and Randall’s work and highlights the importance of inclusive, respectful forums for people to explore and discuss alternative ways of knowing the city.

The dominant paradigm currently directing the construction of the urban environment is lacking a deep, integral relationship to the many others who inhabit the city (Abram, 2011). Urban landscapes are predominantly constructed by industrial notions of efficiency, which subjugate a majority of actors and impoverish our cultural and personal relationships to place. Through centuries of enclosure, our collective imagination has been colonized by a view of independence that divorces us from an integral and mutually sustaining relationship to those
things upon which we depend (Snyder, 1999). This alienation has played an important role in advancing social, cultural, and ecological crises in localities all over the earth (Bowers, 2012).

My findings present a strong case for the role of urban food commons in shifting people’s perceptions of place. By creating trust centered environments in which communities can begin to construct their own pattern languages of design, alternative and empowering views of place emerge. This study identified ten key themes that are important to the emergence of alternative views of place. By explicating an understanding of how these themes influence participants and how they emerge in the Purple Thistle garden, this study provides useful narratives that can be drawn upon to construct other neighborhood food commons in the urban environment. The understanding of what makes the Thistle food commons so influential provides valuable insight to designers, educators, and other people interested in better understanding the impact of our built environment. What becomes clear is that participatory planning and design are vital tools to help resubjectify urbanites. The learning and experiences that come from this resubjectification catalyze alternative understandings of place and promote a new paradigm for relating to the built environment. It is from this place that people can truly begin to imagine the urban impossible.
References


“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”


“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”


“HOW DO WE CREATE TOGETHER?”


Appendix A: July Interview Questions

Can you tell me about how you became involved with the purple thistle guerilla gardeners?

When did you start working in the thistle gardens? How often do you participate?

What was your relationship with the city like when you began?

Have your relationships in the city changed at all, since you became involved with the thistle garden?

Has the way you think about place, or home, changed at all since you became involved with the thistle?

What kinds of things were you involved in before getting involved at the thistle? What kinds of things are you involved in now?

What motivated you to get involved with the thistle garden? What keeps you involved?

What's been the most rewarding aspect of your involvement with the thistle?
Appendix B: October Group Interview

On July 29th I conducted 7 preliminary interviews with participants in the Purple Thistle's Guerilla Garden Project. Participants were selected to represent a diversity of age and experience with the project. My goals in these preliminary semi-structured interviews were to: elicit stories about participant's experience of involvement with the project, invite participants into participation with the research project, gain experience and comfort in leading biographical-interpretive interviews, and set up a method whereby participants can help me to direct the inquiry towards more focused, in-depth investigations. The interview questions (posted below) were designed to inquire into the ways in which involvement with the Purple Thistle Guerilla Garden project influenced participant's subjective experience of the urban landscape. While the questions were not very carefully designed, they did illicit some interesting responses. Below, I highlight some emergent themes (perhaps better described as interesting thoughts) that commonly recurred in participant's responses. These following 6 themes were common to at least 5 of 7 participants interviewed. I present the general framework for each theme in italics, then list participant responses to articulate each theme's meaning.

Open learning environment
“a lot of it is sort of pedagogical, like, this, how to be again, how do these things look like when they’re actually done by people who don’t necessarily, you know, don’t plan on ruling the world, shall we say”
I think I’ve become more open.
I think it’s just a spot where I feel more at home, you know than, other spots, where it’s not quite the culture doesn’t invite that kind of openness and acceptance and inclusivity and that kind of stuff.
it’s really cool to be able to learn just by showing up with a group of friends and someone invites you to participate.
you can just walk up to one of the garden mentors,... and just ask them questions and they’re so willing to tell you about why you mulch this...they’ll tell you how to do different things but more of what they’re telling you to do is observe and the more, sort of, give you a set of reasoning for why you might act a certain way.
the more I participate in it the more I feel like, I feel like it’s my accomplishment it’s something...

Community connection – spend time with others – create sense of home in the city.
most of my interaction with Vancouver were pretty limited - This is not just community gardens this is a community garden where you’re supposed to stop.
I joined this gardening collective [in Windsor, Ont] and suddenly I had this social group of people and I felt really connected, and the city started to really grow on me and in the end I was actually sad when I had to leave it.
Building a garden. It has so much influence on people and on the neighborhood.
We’re not just growing plants, we’re changing [short pause] the community.
I’ve met a lot of new people, and a lot of very interesting, cool people that I would like to hang out with.
I had been looking for, ummm, [pause] ways to connect to things more meaningful I guess.
I have a hard time with the city cause I feel like its sort of, ummm, like I lived collectively too and I still struggle with it, to feel sort of a sense of belonging there. I don’t think it’s the people, I think it’s myself and, and I know it’s me. . .it feels kind of fragmented, to me, like, my life is sort of fragmented.
it’s about something much bigger and it’s about, um, being a part of something together right
I didn’t really like being in Vancouver, um, at first. I felt really, I actually felt really isolated.
I feel like not, like it’s not my city, it’s kinda like very alien to me and I didn’t feel any connection at all.
now I feel a bit more like, oh it’s like a group I can relate it to and like actually do things like physically like somewhere in the city that I go once in a while and I have like place for, I feel like, oh it’s like my space, and then like I can hang out and talk to people a lot.
I think working on projects together is really powerful for like, building solidarity and getting to know people and, um, learning.

Share space and connection with like-minded people
the reason it’s so hard to get, uh, people to work on an area is because of real estate and the fact that the Purple Thistle has a building makes everything so much better. But definitely having a place to go where you know there’s going to be people who have common interests with you makes it easier.
it kinda makes me feel like there are a lot of people who do share similar values, or thoughts, or concerns, or...
I really found a lot of people that I could relate to.

Critical awareness of city, particularly physical environment in city
it became sort of part of the, the possibility of being creative is that you just make the place. Um, and that seems to be fairly, fairly common amongst the types of people who frequent those areas [community commons].
[I've learned to appreciate] how individual the city is, and, and and just how cool, cooler it is to me now than say a year and a half ago.
is opened just my mind up a lot to things political and things outside my small world in which I live.
I mean I’m really grateful for this, like I think it’s, ummm, I wish there was more of it.
not interested in just leaving when I notice things like gentrification, or other issues, ummm, but wanting to be here to be part of whatever struggles happen around that.
Health – connection of personal and community health

I don’t want to leave it [personal garden] in a, in a lousy place cause I know what happens to those places when you’re in a place that’s all concrete and all industry and it looks dirty and it’s smelly and it just, you know, you’re surrounded by barbed wire fence right now [laughter], it’s just really really hard on your morale. And, there’s something about plants that give life. it brings us back to [pause] to a life that’s much more simple and much more healthy, both physically and emotionally and spiritually and socially. When I look out the window and I look at a tree, ummm, [pause] I can’t really, it just calms me down. I think it’s just a way of life that feels healthier to me and more balanced.

Open to new image of the world – Creative confrontation

We don’t think of re-development, that’s our thing, right, and I guess that’s one of the things that, that this group is doing. I mean, you know, it’s an interesting symbol when you say, okay, we’re gunna, I mean, ya, they’re remiadiating but as well, they’re taking the land that they could get. a degree of it is, uh, it’s ability to take on a unique, uh, perspective in some way We’re growing plants but we’re also sending a message that says [pause] hey, we can actually do this. This doesn’t have to be an industrial wasteland. We don’t have to eat food that someone sprayed chemicals on and shipped from who knows where to feed to us. We can, we can take what we’ve got an work with it. We can take this land that was surprisingly not as polluted as we thought it would be [laughter] make it clean, grow food, make something useful out of it, because this used to be just lawn, and lawn isn’t good for anything except laying down on, and, this garden has lots of places where you can lay down. I just appreciate, appreciate where I live now, more, cause I, I’ve been involved in, a, this really cool thing that’s been happening in my city I think it’s best for life to be more like this. You know just, that it’s, um, a reality , that it’s a part of the city here, that it’s a part of, ya, that it’s a part of my world now. It’s like, you know, in its self, its, that it’s a possibility. I’m kinda switching my career goal right now. “I found it really liberating because I could go into the Thistle and like talk about, like, other ways of living, like other, like, oh, is this so unrealistic to wanna grow your own food or to wanna, like support decolonialization”

Focusing the Research Question
After the preliminary interviews, I began to more tightly focus the scope of my research. My personal interests began to emerge in greater clarity, and I realized that I was primarily interested in participants' perception of power in the urban landscape. Specifically, I want to know if involvement in the project influences a participant's experience of oppression in the city, and if so, how. I hypothesize that this project has opened participants to perceive the urban landscape differently, and empowered them to question, challenge, and/or confront the way that some urban spaces serve to reproduce dominant power relationships that oppress and exclude. It is my hope that participant narratives from this meeting can be used to more tightly narrow this research question, giving this study a clarity of focus suited to a masters thesis.

Group Meeting

On Tuesday, October 2nd, I will be meeting with the collective of gardeners at the Purple Thistle for our monthly group potluck. At this potluck, I will be co-facilitating (with youth facilitator and friend Metta Patterson) a discussion around the research questions just mentioned. We will have 30 minutes to an hour with the entire group. Our conversation will follow a group brainstorm on what to do about a City proposal to bulldoze our biggest garden (the Purple Thistle Food Forest) in order to build a “super street” access into downtown Vancouver. Participants in this group discussion will be composed of all gardeners who attend the potluck and are willing to participate in the conversation. I will email the 7 participants who participated in the first interview, encouraging them to attend and add their voices to what promises to be a lively and interesting conversation. Our goal in this meeting will be to illicit narrative responses from the group, which circulate around the research focus.

Goals of Group Meeting

- Gather narrative that can be used to investigate how the themes presented above inform/influence/shape participant's perception of power in the urban landscape.
- Inquire into whether the Purple Thistle Guerilla Garden Project contributes to power relationships in the city and the ways we each (subjectively) engage with the built environment.
- Begin to map how biotic, social, cultural and subjective dimensions serve to shape our perceptions of power in the built environment.
- Determine if there are any powerful mechanisms through which people become critically aware of the power in place, and willing to confront or challenge some place's construction in order to more fairly distribute power.
- Get feedback on ways the project has effected/affected participant's lives, and use their narrative to direct the research question towards more specific inquiry.

Facilitating the Group Meeting

1. Drakehew briefly presents his research interests: I am interested in how the garden project
has influenced you and your life in the city, if it has at all.

2. Clearly present the 6 themes to the group. Explain that these 6 “topics” were commonly expressed in the initial interviews that I did in late July, and that I found them to be particularly fascinating aspects of our involvement in this project. Ask the group if there are other big themes that emerge from being involved in the project that are particularly important to them. If there are other themes that come up, write them on flip chart paper.

3. Distribute all themes around the space, and give everyone 10 minutes to move around the space and jot notes about their thoughts in relation to specific topics. Invite people to write whatever comes up for them. All associations and thoughts are worthwhile, there is no right or wrong, write what you think or what the topic brings up for you personally. Could be a word, a story, an event, a picture . . .

4. Break group up into 3 small groups. Invite each small group to discuss what it's been like for them to be a part of the project. This will take 15 minutes of time. What do you like about the garden project? What do you not like about it? How has it influenced your life in Vancouver? How do you feel when you work in the garden? Why are you involved?

5. Bring group back together and ask each group to present interesting things that came up in their small group conversation. Allow each group 2-3 minutes to present, then invite open conversation that digs into what it's like to be a part of this project. Be sure to remind people throughout that we're not looking for consensus. There is no end point or goal we are reaching for. Rich dialogue, disagreement, and free association are encouraged.
Appendix C: December Interview Questions

Background

I want to understand how involvement in an urban land reclamation project influences participant’s investments in the built landscape of Vancouver. Hollway & Jefferson define investments as one’s “desires and anxieties, probably not conscious or intentional, which motivate the specific positions they take up and the selection of accounts through which they portray themselves.” I want to know if the Purple Thistle Guerilla Garden project has an influence on participant’s investments, and whether this influences the ways they engage with the built environments in the city of Vancouver.

Preamble

Before the interview begins, I will remind people that:
- I am interested in everything they have to say,
- I will not interrupt them,
- They can ask questions or seek clarification at any time,
- They are encouraged to share stories, make connections, and share anything that comes to mind,
- My intention is to take no more than an hour of their time.

Invitation to share

As you know, I’m interested in how being involved in the Thistle garden has influenced your experience of the city, if it has at all.

What comes to mind when thinking about your involvement in this project and your life in the city?

Organizational structure

During our group meeting we asked about people’s experience in the Thistle garden and what it was about the garden project that kept people coming back. This essentially boiled down to the question – “what’s in the garden for you?” What I heard was that the structure, or the way the project is organized, was really important. It was said that the “tools,” “frameworks,” and “structures” of the Thistle provide an ability to “construct your own education” or “conduct your own learning.”

How might the way the project is structured inform how you experience it? (Please feel free to speak in your own words in a way that is most natural.)
Self-discovery

Another thing that I find fascinating is that this project is helping people to discover their “role,” “inspiration,” and/or “passion.”

*Can you say anything about this, in relation to your own experience of working in the garden?*

**Rat race**

I’m hearing a lot of agreement that this project inspires people to take themselves out of “the rat race” so-to-speak. I find this really fascinating because it seems to suggest that this project is offering an alternative, one that has implications beyond the physical constraints of the garden.

*What does “the rat race” mean to you? What comes up for you when thinking about the garden and this so called “rat race?”*

**Privilege**

One thing that surprised me during our group discussions was the role that class or background can play. For example, during our group meeting the idea that only white middle classers can do permaculture and “take themselves out of the rat race” came up. I experienced some tensions, both within myself and within the group, about this idea.

*What comes up for you when you consider the role that someone’s class or background plays in their ability to “do permaculture” and take themselves out of “the rat race.”*

*How has this come up in your work in the garden?*

**Catalyzing a new awareness**

There’s been a lot of talk about the importance of this project highlighting a new kind of awareness. There was also a strong recognition that it is easy to slip back into the so called “rat race.”

*Do you experience this struggle in the garden (like, being shown a new kind of awareness in a culture that does not support or promote it)?*

*What gives you the “perseverance” to continue to live in this new awareness, as I’m calling it?*

**Trust**
I’m hearing a big part of this project is a willingness to work together in a new kind of way, based on mutual trust and respect.

Can you describe what it’s like for you to work together with people? Does it feel like it’s in a new sort of way, and if so, how?

What comes up for you when thinking about the garden and trust?

The experience of being placed and displaced

Something I find fascinating, and that has come up quite a bit, is this idea that the garden project has connected people to a sense of home. People keep bringing up this feeling or sense of being connected, saying the garden has helped them overcome feelings of loneliness or isolation.

What comes to mind for you when thinking about your own connection to place?

How does this effect your involvement at the Thistle?

Scarcity

Another fascinating theme that I’m interested in delving into is our relationship to the “fear of scarcity.” By scarcity I mean a feeling of not having enough, either financially and/or socially.

What are your experiences of scarcity?

Spirituality

It was said during our group meeting that “we’re like a church.”

What comes to mind when you hear that?
Appendix D: Epistemological Assumptions

The ongoing evolution of my analysis in this study has been directed by five key epistemological assumptions. Here I will make these clear, placing myself as a researcher within a way of knowing that will guide this inquiry (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

The first assumption I make is derived from psychosocial research methodology, which holds that the researcher is the instrument of analysis (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). As the instrument that will construct all analysis, efforts to bracket my own perceptions must be made with great care. It is impossible to completely separate myself from this study. I have worked not to simply suppress my assumptions, emotions, contexts and intrapsychic experiences. Instead, I have chosen to carefully explore and probe my own experiences throughout this study, in order to ensure that they do not unconsciously manipulate my analysis. Working to bring these experiences to conscious awareness has helped me to bracket that which could motivate others and myself towards certain response or analysis. Working to understand my own positioning as a defended subject is the most honest way for me to pursue a deeper understanding of participant’s experience of involvement with the Thistle garden (Tufford & Newman, 2010). I have done this by: keeping a journal to record my shifting experiences and feelings as related to the garden project, speaking with friends and mentors about the process of inquiry and my relation to it, and creating art in the form of music and poetry to surface and explore my experience in relation to this study.

The second assumption is that the nature of meaning construction is participatory and necessarily involves many (Bateson, 1979). So while I am the primary unit of analysis, the
meanings I form of participant responses are highly motivated by the participants themselves. Further, participant’s reports of their own experience and my interpretations are also influenced by the: places, times, societies, cultures, humans, and more-than-human others who inhabit our shared experience (Abram, 2011). Honest analysis requires an openness to and awareness of these many others. For this reason I will endeavor to discover important: places, times, societies, cultures, humans, and more-than-human others that inhabit participant dialogue and invite them into analysis as important contributors to this study. All of these others have been involved in the writing of this thesis. This has been accomplished by: sitting and careful observation in the Purple Thistle gardens through every season; collecting and sitting with photos of the garden’s emergence over its entire history; exploring participant’s connection to history, culture, and place; connecting with other people in the community to understand the Thistle garden’s impact and influence upon communities not directly involved in the garden; and a detailed study of the place of the garden’s colonial and pre-colonial history to understand how the land and culture have changed over the past 500 years.

The third assumption is that difference is both inevitable and to be cherished. Every perceivable thing is a unique, potentially bewildering entity, with unknown facets and perspectives (Bowers, 2012). This is to be recognized and highly valued. Understanding the nature of relationship as a partnership between I and Thou is to invite difference into analysis (Abram, 2010). As acknowledge by the participatory nature of meaning construction, there is no clear subject/object divide that places human reason on a separate plane of knowing (Bateson, 1979). Instead, every other is imbued with its own unique meanings. We come to know these
meanings through a process of exchange between two perceiving bodies (Abram, 2010). Understanding difference in this way dignifies the many others who participate in the construction of meaning and allows them to respectfully enter the analysis.

The fourth assumption is that language is a metaphor for parts of the self. What we say “is always at some level saying something about the self, while ostensibly describing something other” (Cartwright, 2002, p.218). Integrating local contexts and many senses, oral communication weaves the storyteller into the picture (Bowers, 2012), allowing the listener to better understand both the storyteller and the elements in the story being told. The language we use, the stories we tell, and the contexts within which we communicate are all windows that help others to understand and relate to us. This metaphorical nature of language is a powerful way of coming to know another, and has been the foundation of analysis and understanding participants’ experience in this study.