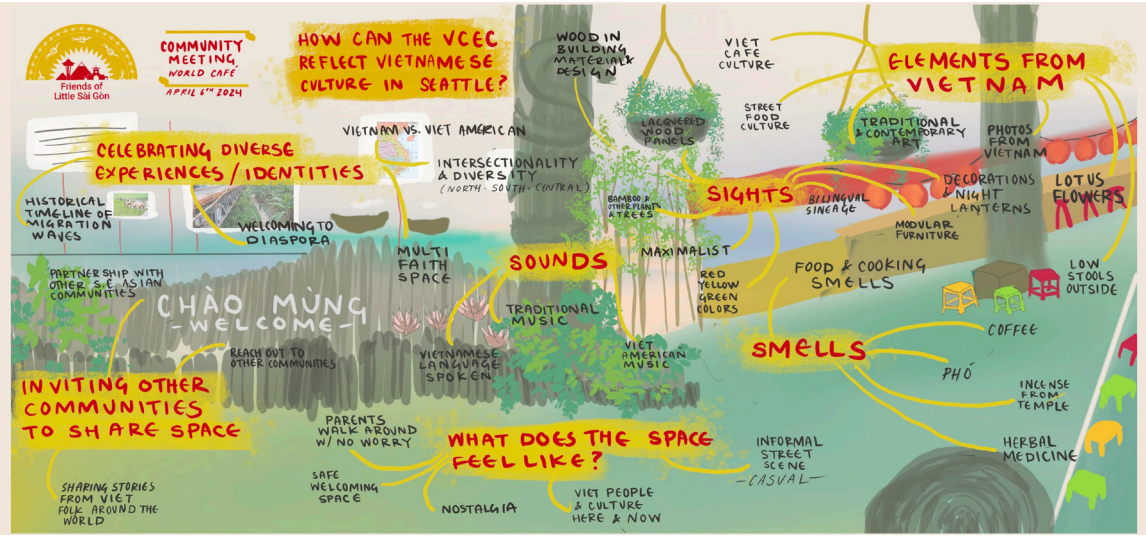
Relational Capacity



FLS conducted public engagement workshops to learn how their new Landmark Project building can reflect Vietnamese culture in Seattle.

Credit: Mari Shibuya

Relational capacity is an organization's ability to build and sustain meaningful, trust-based relationships across individuals, groups, and sectors to strengthen collective action and community resilience. For community-focused organizations, relational capacity means creating inclusive, reciprocal, and equitable connections—not only with partners, but across lines of identity, geography, and lived experience.

Relationships rooted in dignity helps counter the forces that seek to divide communities and help them thrive together, choosing curiosity over control, compassion over fear, and collaboration over isolation. In-person and virtual meetings, trainings and convenings, and peer relationships can seed and blossom into meaningful partnerships.

Relational capacity may include:

- Forming strategic, transparent, and mutually beneficial partnerships that center community needs and values (partnership and collaboration);
- Creating and nurturing cross-sector, cross-community networks that connect people, organizations, and ideas for shared impact (network building); and
- Facilitating dialogue, trust, and collaboration across lines of difference (e.g., race, culture, age, language), and embedding equity in all relationship-building efforts (intergroup engagement).

In short, relational capacity is about moving from transactional interactions to transformational relationships—grounded in trust, shared purpose, and community leadership.

How Friends of Little Sài Gòn (FLS) Builds Relational Capacity

"Working here has taught me a lot about the history of this neighborhood [...] It also taught me about advocacy, how to advocate for your neighborhood, the people, and what you care about."
—Ahn Nguyen, Arts & Culture Program Manager, Friends of Little Sài Gòn

Friends of Little Sài Gòn's mission is to preserve and enhance Seattle's Little Sài Gòn's cultural, economic, and historic vitality. FLS's efforts to create crosswalks and to host the Celebrate Little Sài Gòn demonstrates how the community has built relational capacity.

12th Ave and Jackson Street is known as the heart of Little Sài Gòn, where businesses first started to gather and establish themselves in the late 1970s. This intersection serves as the main arterial for traveling to, from, and between major downtown neighborhoods in Seattle. Designed by Duy Vo and inspired by the Hoàn Kiếm Legend, the crosswalks features flowing turtles and lotus flowers. The design and location of the crosswalks are a visible reminder of being in Little Saigon and signal to drivers and pedestrians alike to slow down and take in the scenery.

Former Executive Director Quynh Pham said,

"[Doing the crosswalks] was part of our effort to create a stronger identity for the neighborhood. It was our effort to increase the arts and culture in the neighborhood. [...] this was a visual representation of the Vietnamese identity in the neighborhood."

Painted crosswalks are also installed at the 12th & Jackson Streetcar stop. Designed by artist Minh Carrico, the artwork draws inspiration from the Vietnamese folktale of Âu Cơ and Lạc Long Quân, the fairy and dragon ancestors of Vietnam, symbolizing unity and lineage. Quynh Pham also talks about skills they developed while working with city partners, such as the Seattle Department of Transportation, on these projects. "I think the scale of the project too, as we get more experience in this, [...] we're being asked to do more challenging projects, or major projects that require additional expertise that we probably wouldn't have developed."

Celebrate Little Sài Gòn is an annual block party in Seattle's Historic Little Sài Gòn hosted by Friends of Little Sài Gòn. This all-ages free street festival celebrates Vietnamese cuisine and culture by highlighting local businesses and bringing together Vietnamese artists and performers. Visitors enjoy live music, games, raffles and prizes, and an eating competition for kids and adults.

One artist participant shares,

"I have no idea how much that opportunity would have changed my life, or the trajectory of my small art business [...] when I met with other community members, or when I met up with friends. [...] it kind of allowed for me to bridge connections with other creatives. ...You're bringing all these people together. Not only are you giving them an opportunity to support our small local vendors but inviting them to get involved and stay involved every year."

Hearing how artists have benefited from FLS's work demonstrated the true impact of the organization. One artist who helped design the branding for Celebrate Little Sài Gòn spoke of how working with FLS has allowed her to connect with her heritage and transformed her art to reflect her cultural identity. Reflecting with other staff members who worked on the projects demonstrated how much growth FLS has experienced, as an organization, as well as growth in personal capacity, experiences, and relationships with artists and city agencies.