



Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks

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February 16, 2017

Jesús Aguirre
Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation
100 Dexter Ave N
Seattle, WA 98109

Dear Mr. Aguirre:

Given recent coverage of SAAM's controversial proposed museum expansion, the Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks (FSOP) would like to make clear its involvement and intent throughout this process. FSOP has been reviewing and providing feedback to the Seattle Art Museum (SAM)'s proposal since spring 2016. Our goal has been to help the museum find a solution that meets their needs and protects the historic landscape and parkland that surrounds it. We think SAM is on a path that will help us reach a reasonable compromise to meet these goals.

These goals are not easy to achieve. If SAM is going to pursue investing the public funds (originating from the 2008 Park Levy) necessary to upgrade the mechanical infrastructure of the building, they need to be sure the building will serve their purposes and help them fulfill their mission. If the park's historic landscape is to be preserved, it needs to maintain its integrity and be able to function as John Charles Olmsted intended. Further, if the park is going to fulfill its mission, it needs to be able to offer city residents park land to enjoy as a respite from the urban areas that surround it. Thus the proposed museum expansion is of particular concern as to how it affects the sense of space and character of the park and how pedestrian connections through the park are to be retained and restored.

We advocate for the preservation of the Olmsted-designed landscape in Volunteer Park because it is one of Seattle's premier parks and because of its historical significance. It has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1975 as nationally significant because of its design by the Olmsted Brothers, which was described in the National Register nomination as the centerpiece of Seattle's park and boulevard system. This past year the museum, designed by Carl Gould, was added to the register for its local significance.

When we reviewed the proposed changes to the museum and the surrounding landscape in their first incarnation, we had a number of concerns. First and foremost was the lack of public engagement on the part of the museum prior to rolling out their proposed solution. Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) has a robust public engagement process that is activated for any significant change to Parks-owned land or buildings. Its intent is to engage the community before any solutions are developed. That process was not followed and we advocated for more outreach into the community. Since then SPR and SAM added signage and additional public meetings. We encourage that engagement to continue with transparent presentation of the project and the proposed Museum and City

agreements as they are being developed so all parties can be informed as the project moves forward.

A second concern focused on the need to preserve the function of the east side of the park. Olmsted designed that area as a greensward – a large lawn area with trees and planting beds and connecting paths. The original design of the space immediately adjacent to the museum cannot be preserved precisely according to the original design because of the museum's construction in 1932, which erased the concert grove and pergola east of the concourse. That does not mean the area to the east no longer has historical integrity, but it does mean that in assessing any proposed modification of the space, we seek to protect the function it was intended to have, as is recommended by the Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes.

We asked the museum to remove the planned terrace on the east side of the building because a programmed use of that area of the park was the antithesis of what Olmsted intended. Instead, we recommended that they carry the greensward's lawn to the base of the building, minimize the emergency exit impact, and plant trees at the southeast corner to buffer the interface between the building and the park. They have incorporated these suggestions into the latest proposed plans.

We also looked at how the building's massing and height would affect the surrounding landscape. The greensward is already shaded by the museum, and extending the building further into the greensward would amplify the current structure's shadow and intrusion on that space. We have asked that the architects revisit the south and east facades to modulate the scale of the large, mostly unbroken mass that will loom over the park, and to explore ways to reduce its overall bulk. We are awaiting their next presentation to the Landmarks Preservation Board to see how they address these concerns and what alternatives they provide.

Finally, we have asked the museum and SPR to include improvements to the park's paths to address the project's impact on the park as a whole. We recommended improvements to historic and existing paths and have worked with the project's landscape architects to examine historic plans and photographs and existing conditions to determine what improvements are appropriate.

The issues raised around the SAAM expansion are not unique to Volunteer Park. Seattle has had an Olmsted Brothers-planned park and boulevard system for well over a century. The neighborhood parks, larger destination parks, green spaces, and parkways are key elements in making our city livable. They are available to everyone and provide much-needed access to open space, quiet, room to exercise, and places to gather. But they are also subject to pressure from population growth and multiple visions for how public open space should be utilized. Protecting these irreplaceable park spaces from endless pressures of filling “empty” space requires ongoing vigilance.

We have a remarkable, nationally significant Olmsted Brothers park and boulevard system - something that only a few cities can claim. Our park system is part of the body of work of the Olmsted firms that includes Central Park in New York, the Emerald Necklace in Boston, and the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. It is a legacy we treasure and that residents and visitors marvel at and enjoy daily.

These are living landscapes and the communities that surround them change over time. We seek to work with SPR and organizations such as SAM to explore the particulars of each park or boulevard and chart a path forward that protects and rehabilitates the Olmsted vision and intended character while also ensuring they remain viable and useful to the community.

John Charles Olmsted opposed a 1910 proposal to construct a museum in the park in part because of the proposal's building size (more than double the size of the original Gould building), which he feared would have subordinated the landscape of the park to the museum. The original Gould-designed art museum built over twenty years later was more in keeping with the scale of the park. The historically significant art

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museum building has been an integral part of the park for 85 years, and it would be a devastating blow to Volunteer Park if the museum left. Parks may be hard-pressed to find a tenant who could make use of a building of that size with such a specialized design and landmark protection, which also requires significant upgrades to its infrastructure. At the same time, the museum needs to respect its role as a tenant of a publicly-owned building located in an historic public park.

We believe that in working together, a solution that protects the historic integrity of the park and meets the needs of both the museum and park users can be found. SPR and SAM are working their way toward such a solution and the Landmarks Preservation Board's public process will also guide their efforts and ensure that the expansion is limited to the minimum square footage necessary, and avoids forfeiting valuable park land. We support SAM's efforts to ensure the long-term viability of the Seattle Asian Art Museum and remain committed to working with all parties to reach a successful solution.

Sincerely,



Andy Mitton
President

cc: Kim Rorschach, Seattle Art Museum
Brian Giddens, Volunteer Park Trust
Thatcher Bailey, Seattle Parks Foundation
Knute Berger, Crosscut
Greg Hanson, Crosscut