

Original Report on Museum Site

OLMSTED BROTHERS
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS, BROOKLINE, MASS.

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11th October, 1910.

Mr. J. T. Heffernan, President,
Board of Park Commissioners, Seattle, Washington.

Dear Sir:

We beg to report on the question referred to us by letter of your Secretary dated 28th September as to whether or not we advise your Board to grant a building site in Volunteer Park to the Washington State Art Association for a large museum building.

We are in hearty sympathy with the purposes of the Washington State Art Association, one of us in fact being a member of it, and we wish to do anything we can to help them, but in this case we must act as our professional duty to your Board and as the best interests of the parks and of the public requires.

In order to pass sound logical judgment on a question of this kind we must begin by considering the fundamental ideas which should control the acquisition, development and maintenance of such park properties as Volunteer Park and then consider whether an emergency exists which will justify your Board in acting contrary to those fundamental park principles.

Municipal parks are properly classifiable under the three principal classes. First, ornamental public squares; second, playground parks; third, landscape parks. In ornamental squares it would not be permissible to make an athletic ground and gymnastic apparatus the principal feature, but it would be allowable to reduce the size of a public square by running a needed street across it or by placing a handsome public building in it. It would be in such a case mainly a question of balance of advantages. The larger a public square is the more worth while it is. To cut one in two by a cross street would be greatly detrimental but would not necessarily annihilate the usefulness of the public square. So, too, the placing of a public building in a public square might be done in such a way as not to destroy but merely reduce the area of the ornamental ground. In a general way the same is true of a playground park.

But to place an extraneous public building in a landscape park is entirely different. The building in such a case is so large and imposing as to destroy the essential qualities of a landscape park. The landscape ceases to be a naturalistic park landscape, and becomes a building landscape. As a general rule park commissioners should consider themselves as trustees for the preservation of the peoples parks against encroachments for all other uses no matter how valuable they are likely to become to the public. They should not consider themselves as trustees of some vacant land which they are to assign for any commendable public building. Neither the city as a whole, nor the Capitol Hill section of it has a superfluity of park area, if due allowance is made for increase of population.

The question of placing a public building in a public park of the landscape class is not one of those which may properly be left to public opinion. It is a specially technical one involving esthetic principles which few even of the most cultivated citizens would be competent to pass upon.

Volunteer Park belongs to the class of parks which may be distinguished from ornamental public squares, public gardens and public playgrounds by the designation "landscape park." In a landscape park the planning and improvement of its landscape possibilities should always be the first consideration. In a park of that class, there should be no building or other feature no matter how meritorious in itself, that is not introduced as an aid to the public in enjoying the landscape. Any building in a landscape park should be subordinated very completely to the landscape design.

Volunteer Park is obviously a landscape park — not an ornamental public square nor primarily a public playground. The conclusion is evident that the proposed

art museum is not suggested as a means for the public to enjoy the landscape of the park. Owing to its size and style of architecture the art museum is in no way to be subordinate to the park landscape, but on the contrary the museum would completely dominate a large part if not the whole of the park.

In our opinion, there is no emergency which would justify the Park Board in destroying much of the landscape value of this park by consenting to the placing of such a building in it.

We therefore report that the application for an art museum site in Volunteer Park should be declined.

Should your Board, notwithstanding our advice, conclude to allow the art museum in Volunteer Park we should much prefer to see it placed where we proposed a conservatory; that is, between Seward Circle and the cemetery. We doubt if this site is big enough to allow the extensions of the art museum that will undoubtedly be required, so that in granting this site the Park Board must realize that a good deal more of the park must eventually be devoted to the museum and its accessories than is now asked for.

Our interest in the proposed art museum leads us to offer some additional suggestions.

It would help greatly in arousing public opinion in favor of a special municipal loan for site and building for the art museum, if the museum could be kept in a much more central and easily accessible place than the summit of the hill in Volunteer Park. The fact that the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York was for years located on 14th Street near 5th Avenue not only made it easy to interest persons of wealth and social position in it, but also made it extremely convenient for a great many people to visit it who while not wealthy could exercise a good deal of influence on public opinion, leading eventually to the decision by the City to supply both site and permanent building.

We believe further that the City, through its Park Board, should not only provide a suitable site for the art museum but should, in addition, build, equip and maintain the building and enlarge it from time to time as required, leaving the resources and efforts of the association to be devoted to the acquisition and care of collections and to art education. This is the method followed by the City of New York in dealing with the Metropolitan Art Museum, and it has proved far more efficient than that proposed by the Washington State Art Association is likely to prove. Pictures and other works of fine art that

are worth having are very expensive, and we believe the Association would accomplish far more for the advancement of art if they devote their energies ^{to} getting the City to provide site and building so they can use all the private contributions they can collect in acquiring works of art.

Further, we suggest that the proposed art museum, being a large and imposing semi-public building, surely ought to be located by the Civic Plans Commission at some Civic Center to be determined upon by them in connection with the revision of the street plan which they are now considering. We believe it would be a fair interpretation of the duty of your Board to take this view of the case and for this reason if for no other to refuse to consider this or any other application for a site for the Art Museum on Volunteer Park or any other park until after the Civic Plan Commission has reported. If the Civic Plan Commission should recommend a Civic Center, it would become the duty of your Board to aid in the realization of the Civic Center by cultivating public opinion favorably to a municipal loan for the purpose of acquiring such part of the needed land as could most appropriately be taken charge of by your Board, including, it is to be hoped, a site for

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a public art museum such as that contemplated by the
Washington Art Association.

Yours respectfully,

Oliver T. Brothers