



**Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks**

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October 4, 2016

RE: Seattle Asian Art Museum in Volunteer Park

Dear Landmarks Preservation Board Members:

As stewards of Olmsted Parks in Seattle and in follow-up to our letter of June 23, 2016, the Board of Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks continues to be very concerned about the impacts the proposed expansion of the Seattle Asian Art Museum in Volunteer Park. Although we all support the museum and its mission (many of us are long-term museum members and have participated in many programs at the museum over the years), we believe the museum needs to take great care in how it proposes any expansion into the park.

Volunteer Park is on the National Register of Historic Places, receiving the honor in 1975 of being listed as *nationally significant*, and is a designated Seattle Landmark as of 2011. Therefore, any alteration to the park is of significant concern and requires thoughtful consideration to meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes.

The Museum expansion proposes to alter the landscape in multiple ways, and to take park land for museum purposes. We are not only concerned about the taking of additional land from the park, but also are uncomfortable with the proposed scale of the three-story extension into the park. Although the architect has taken some important steps in reducing the visual impact, i.e. removing the external stairway structure originally proposed and shifting the elevator location, we believe there are still other measures that can be taken.

With this in mind, FSOP Board members have asked for a clearer justification of the space needs and configuration, believing that there could be a less intrusive design and footprint. Although we fully understand the museum's desire for more space that desire needs to be carefully balanced against the loss of park land and the impact of the structure and proposed path reconfigurations on park users.

**Rehabilitation Standards**

In reviewing the proposal, we believe it is important to take into full consideration the Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes that apply to both landmark properties. Four of the most relevant Standards are those found under the category of Rehabilitation, defined as the act or process of making possible a compatible use for a property through repair, alterations, and additions while preserving those portions or features which convey its historical, cultural, or architectural values.

The specific Rehabilitation Standards that are most applicable to this project's impact on Volunteer Park are:

- 1. A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.
- 2. The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.
- 9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.
- 10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in a such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

These Standards (see the complete list at the end of the letter) also apply to changes proposed to the building and are helpful in understanding how best to approach the expansion in a manner that would seamlessly interface with the historic landscape context.

### **Comments on the Proposal**

As the proposal continues to evolve, we offer comments on specific aspects that are of particular concern. Our hope is the comments will shed light on potential opportunities that help minimize impacts of the proposed Art Museum project on spaces, features and spatial relationships within the park.

### **Building Scale and Interface with the Park**

In commenting on the current proposal, the proposed interface of the building expansion to the east with the ground plane is of particular concern. There is an opportunity to reduce the scale of the building by setting it into the existing grade. Identifying a suitable interface of the building with the park needs to be defined from the perspective of how the building resides within the site. The landscape as described in the 1903 Olmsted Brothers report was to be of a “neat and smooth style of landscape gardening throughout, thus harmonizing with its surroundings.”

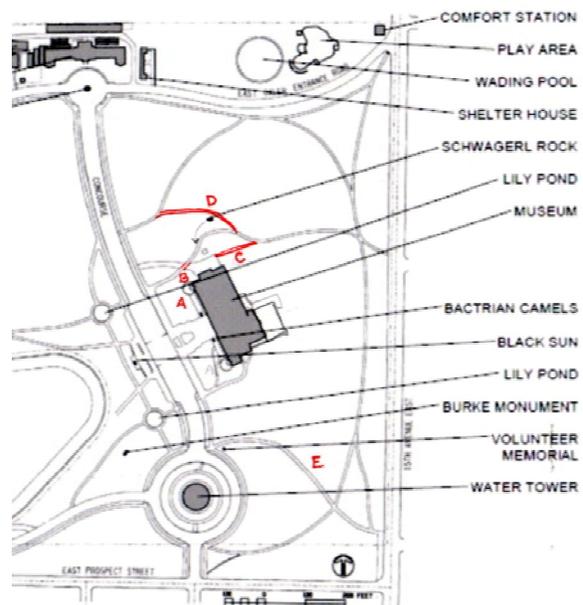
The museum proposal to further extend its footprint into the park by grading a terrace extension 20-26 feet eastward from the proposed 35-foot addition is contrary to preserving the park landscape. It creates a totally new landscape that is not compatible with the historic character of the east side of the park as a greensward with a gently sloping lawn interspersed with trees and planting. The museum needs an egress door on the lower level, but it does not need a terrace or a floor-to-ceiling bank of windows. Having entertained a range of aspirations for what the addition might provide, we now more clearly recognize that the east side of the building sits in an informal natural landscape compared to the formal character of the highly designed west entry. Therefore, we find programmed space added to the backside of the building to be inconsistent with the historic site. Rather, there should be a more focused examination of the building placement within the existing landscape and how it serves as a backdrop for the park in the least intrusive manner.

As such, the transition to the greensward should begin immediately at the eastern edge of the museum building.

The proposed new addition to the south and east façades is generally an unbroken mass, that will loom over the park. Identifying ways to modulate this scale would be very beneficial in reducing the impact on the park. Since the SE corner of the expansion is the tallest point from the existing grade and, as currently designed, is topped with a large mass without relief of fenestration, providing for planting to screen the building along the south and east would be beneficial.

### Paths and Circulation

The Olmsted Plan provides the framework of circulation within the park. The museum proposal has significant impacts on that circulation system. As one of the first goals in rehabilitation is to strengthen the historic character, including the historic circulation patterns, we believe that there are better solutions that meet the ADA access needs while retaining and reinstating some of the original path connections.



– Current park plan

- A. In the lawn in the front (west side) of the museum, the landscape architect proposes to install a new ADA path through the north Hoggson lawn and to reconfigure the existing one in the south lawn to be compliant. We support making the south path compliant, but do not think that inserting a path in the north lawn is appropriate, since it was not part of the Hoggson plan. Inserting intrusions just for the sake of creating symmetry does not meet the intent of Federal Standards. The path on the south side requires less grade change and thus can sit more discreetly in the landscape.
- B. The existing path that connects the north lawn of the museum to the northeast park greensward, is an important connector within the park and provides a typical Olmstedian experience of transitioning between spaces and being able to see through and be drawn to the next space. The upper section of this path is part of the Hoggson plan, which reconnected the original east-west Olmsted path when the museum was built in 1932.

The museum proposal takes over this path as access to the elevated ADA ramp for staff. We believe that both needs can be met, by having the path divide to join the ramp and allow the park path to continue down into the park. Retaining this path is highly desirable.

- C. Reestablishing the east-west Olmsted path is important for continuing access from the east side of the park to the heart of the park in front of the museum. The Hoggson plan was laid out to retain this important east-west connection, but over the years it has, in effect, been blocked by parking and dumpsters.

There is an opportunity to reinstate this historic connection, not as a main ADA path, but as an optional path connection so that park users have a convenient and direct way to get from the east side of the park to the front of the museum. The dumpsters are proposed to be placed out-of-sight behind the loading dock and there is no need for a parking lot to

take up park land when there is plenty of parking elsewhere and nearby in the park. With the reconfigured loading dock area, the path can share the driveway which will have relatively limited use on any given day. Since it won't be a main path it can easily be blocked off when special events are happening that would require exclusive museum use.

- D. The proposed ADA connection north of the museum in the northeast greensward by itself takes park users far out of their way, but in combination with the existing and reinstated path connections described above (B. and C.), it could potentially provide an acceptable ADA route if the grading and landscape impacts are properly addressed in laying out the path. Further analysis of circulation routes in the park needs to be done before implementing this new path connection (see E. below).
- E. Resolving ADA access from the SE corner of the park, where the bus stops are that serve the park and museum, needs more attention. Improving such access and determining how it should go through the park is a critical need in addressing pedestrian and wheelchair access.

### **Construction Impacts**

We are, not surprisingly, concerned about the construction impacts of the museum project on the park and its landscape. Thus we are awaiting information about the construction routing, lay down areas and utility service locations to be able to fully assess the impacts and identify if there are reasonable ways to minimize the impacts on the park and its landscape.

### **Summary**

As we review the Art Museum plans we continually ask ourselves how the proposed impacts can be minimized. The proposal to expand the building needs to have a firm understanding of the landscape and its circulation patterns, uses and spatial relationships while exploring options that reduce the actual building mass and scale. We believe there is urgency for the project team to examine the Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes to allow a more comprehensive study of the landscape the project is proposing to impact. Changes should not be undertaken without fully understanding the context, use and circulation needs of the east side of the park and the historic character for which Volunteer Park is nationally significant.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment, as this is a very significant and complicated project that needs very thoughtful input from the Landmarks Board. We welcome the opportunity to answer any questions the Board may have.

Sincerely,



Andy Mitton  
President, Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks

cc: Jesus Aguirre, Seattle Parks and Recreation  
Kimerly Rorschach, Seattle Art Museum  
Richard Beckerman, Seattle Art Museum

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October 4, 2016

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Resources:

Seattle Landmark Nomination for Volunteer Park - 2011:

<http://www.seattle.gov/friendsofolmstedparks/images/Landmark%20Nomination/Volunteer%20Park%20Landmark%20Nomination.pdf>

Seattle Landmark Nomination for SAAM and the Hoggson forecourt - 1988:

<http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Neighborhoods/HistoricPreservation/Landmarks/RelatedDocuments/seattle-asian-art-museum-volunteer-park-designation.pdf>

NPS National Register Nomination for Volunteer Park - 1975:

<http://npgallery.nps.gov/nrhp/GetAsset?assetID=180be199-6961-4c87-b814-5c65cf9e4cf0>

NPS National Register Nomination for SAAM - 2016:

[http://www.dahp.wa.gov/sites/default/files/SeattleArtMuseum\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.dahp.wa.gov/sites/default/files/SeattleArtMuseum_FINAL.pdf)

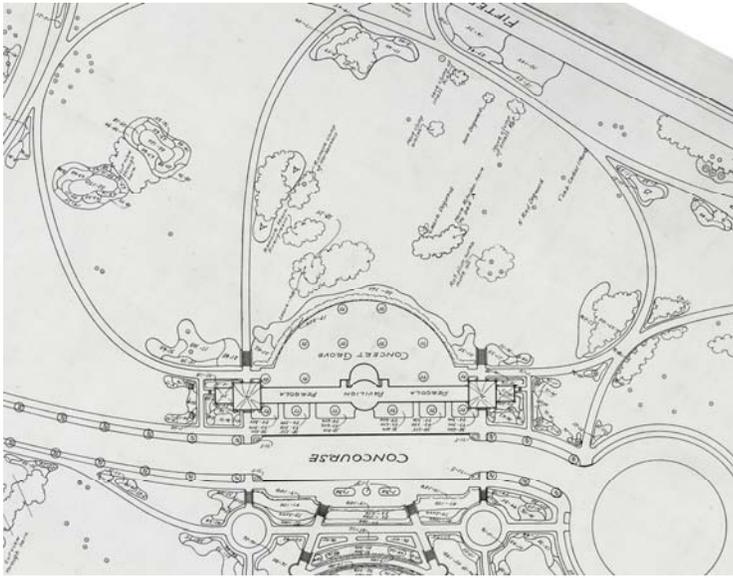
NPS Guidelines for Rehabilitating Cultural Landscapes – Treatment for Historic Properties

<https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards/four-treatments/landscape-guidelines/rehab/approach.htm>

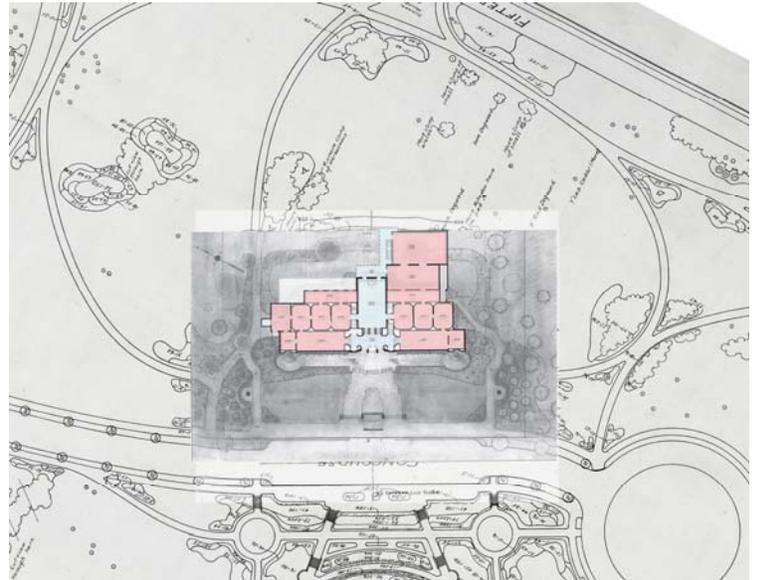
<https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards/four-treatments/landscape-guidelines/rehab/index.htm>

*Rehabilitation* is defined as the act or process of making possible a compatible use for a property through repair, alterations, and additions while preserving those portions or features which convey its historical, cultural, or architectural values.

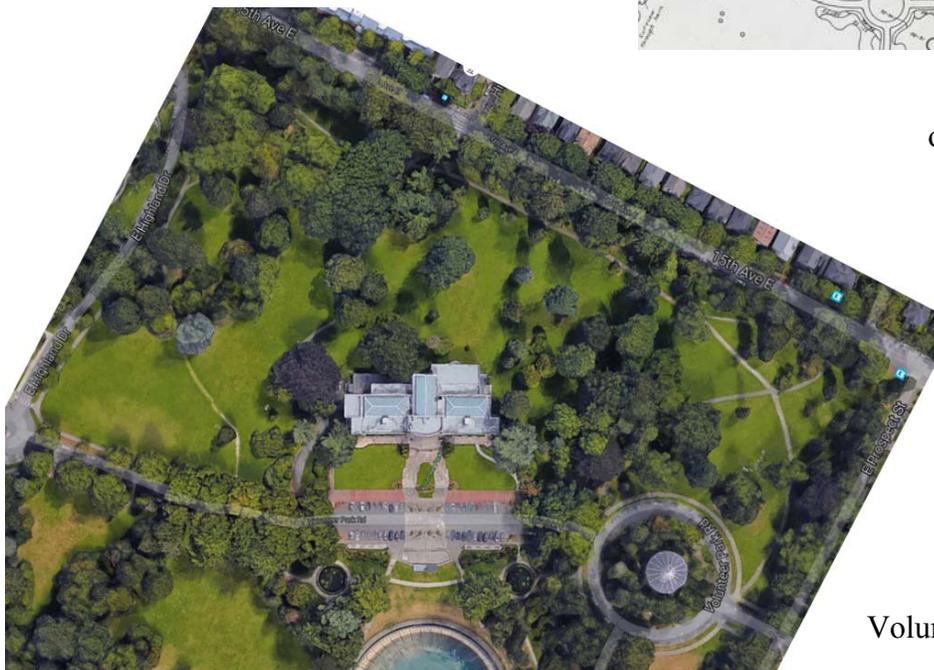
1. A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.
2. The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.
3. Each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, will not be undertaken.
4. Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.
5. Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved.
6. Deteriorated historic features will be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature will match the old in design, color, texture, and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features will be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence.
7. Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, will be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that cause damage to historic materials will not be used.
8. Archeological resources will be protected and preserved in place. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures will be undertaken.
9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.
10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in a such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.



1909 Olmsted Planting Plan



1909 Olmsted Planting Plan overlaid with 1932 Hoggson Plan and main floor plan of Seattle Asian Art Museum with proposed expansion



Volunteer Park