



NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION for  
OLMSTED  
PARKS

*“... advances Olmsted’s principles and legacy of irreplaceable parks and landscapes that revitalize communities and enrich people’s lives.”*

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December 7, 2016

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO: Members of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board  
Superintendent Jesus Aguirre,  
Seattle Dept. of Parks and Recreation  
Kimerly Rorschach, Director and CEO, Seattle Art Museum**

**FROM: Board of Trustees, NAOP**

The National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP) strongly recommends that the City of Seattle reconsider plans to expand the building that houses the private Asian Art Museum in Volunteer Park. This park is well known nationally, and prominently featured in permanent exhibits at the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Park visitor center in Brookline, Massachusetts. Volunteer Park is significant both individually and as the centerpiece of one of the best-designed and most fully implemented comprehensive park systems the Olmsted landscape architecture firm created over its century of practice. Volunteer Park’s double landmark status documents that significance.

Our concern centers on the impact that the addition will have on the park landscape and its users. We believe this addition – while answering the museum’s stated needs – irreparably damages the design integrity, and uses land intended for the public’s enjoyment of passive recreation, with the result of ultimately diminishing some of the key elements that give Volunteer Park its unique status in a busy urban setting: quiet and solitude as a counterpoint to social activity.

Specifically, in the proposed plan the addition would alter the intended picturesque scenery and informal character of the park’s pastoral East Greensward. The proposed building is an unmodulated box taller than any existing façade, with a cantilevered glass lobby overlooking park users below, disrupting their privacy and relaxation. The addition will cast long shadows across the remaining greensward and narrow it by 80 feet from its original breadth, to as little as 200 feet from the perimeter path. This distance is just four times the wing’s height – uncomfortably close, uncomfortably tall.

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[www.olmsted.org](http://www.olmsted.org)

1200 18th Street NW Suite 330 Washington, D.C. 20036  
PHONE: 202-223-9113 FAX: 202-223-9112 INFO@NAOP.ORG

The new structure is stark and assertive, without design features or site placement to soften its landscape interface. Its relationship to the historic museum is likewise jarring. In other settings this aesthetic choice of a strong contrast between the architecture and its natural setting might be appropriate. Here it violates fundamental Olmstedian design principles embodied in character-defining features of this landmark landscape:

- Integration of architecture into the landscape
- Making formal elements subsidiary within the naturalistic landscape
- Creating vistas and sequential experiences that draw users through space
- Providing restorative settings as “a natural antidote to the nervous exhaustion” of city life

And more specifically:

- Disrupting the continuity of greensward (open lawn with trees) encircling the park’s formal core
- Disturbing the intentionally quiet, naturalistic character of the park’s east slope
- Competing with and distracting focus from the picturesque, restorative landscape
- Blocking long vistas and intermediate views of specimen trees and groves, from several lines of sight
- Reducing usable park space designed for passive recreational use

We likewise question the wisdom of converting green space during a time of rapid urban growth, understanding that Volunteer Park serves users far beyond its local neighborhood. A century ago Seattle’s population growth was as rampant as it is today, increasing by over 200,000 in twenty years. Volunteer Park’s designer John Olmsted counseled civic leaders to acquire large parcels of land while they were still available and relatively affordable. Seattle is fortunate to have secured this irreplaceable legacy. Today it cannot acquire new parkland and to meet new needs. While the museum is no doubt worthy, historic greenspace would be permanently sacrificed for its expansion. With some rethinking, we trust that the museum and its design team could find other, less damaging solutions that will above all safeguard this outstanding heritage landscape.

As a national organization dedicated to the preservation of the Olmsted design legacy for current and future generations, we promote these parks as part of our country’s cultural patrimony. We consider significant changes like expanding a building not integral to the park’s original design and purpose with the utmost concern. Volunteer Park was expressly intended to be a landscape park without major buildings. John C. Olmsted warned about the idea that landscape parks are “merely vacant land awaiting decoration by public buildings”. The museum’s 1933 construction in the heart of the park cannot be undone, but further damage can and should be averted to the fullest extent possible.

Thank you for your consideration of NAOP's request to investigate alternative proposals before the opportunity passes.

Sincerely,



Lucy Lawliss  
NAOP Co-Chair



Patrice Kish  
NAOP Co-Chair

Copies:

Seattle Mayor Edward Murray

Members, Seattle City Council

Members, Seattle Board of Park Commissioners

Nathan Torgelson, Director, Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections