

MEMORANDUM

July 25, 2017

TO: Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board
FROM: M. Eliza Davidson, Arbutus Design LLC
SUBJECT: Call to Withhold SAAM Expansion Certificate of Approval

I have both written to and spoken before the LPB on the subject of SAAM expansion, and have attended almost all SAM / LMN briefings going back to May 2016. My perspective draws on my uniquely relevant professional credentials and experience. I am a:

- Licensed Architect (retired) with historical architecture experience & preservation training
- ISA certified Consulting Arborist and Seattle Parks Urban Forester (2001-2005)
- Trustee of the National Association for Olmsted Parks (12 years) and Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks (30+ years)
- Co-founder of Volunteer Park Trust (2012)
- Heritage landscape management expert with 20+ years of experience, including 12 Seattle Olmsted parks and WA State Capitol Grounds
- Author of Volunteer Park Vegetation Management Plan (2005)

and:

- Museum visitor and park user my entire life.

I am submitting these comments as final encouragement for the Landmarks Preservation Board to withhold a COA for the current museum submittal, rather than settle for a plan that is problematic in significant ways and unworthy of the dual landmarks it would irrevocably, unnecessarily alter. Instead I urge that you require SAM to produce authentic, substantive alternatives, particularly to the south and underground within its footprint or under the entry terrace and lawn.

1. PLEASE ADDRESS THE ROOT PROBLEM

Seattle citizens wholeheartedly supported and still support much-needed museum renovations included in the 2008 parks levy. Regrettably, the public was never subsequently asked about an expansion consuming parkland and almost doubling the museum's original size. This escalation in scope occurred behind closed doors, and public funding quietly more than doubled. Seattle residents and visitors universally treasure our public green spaces, and in particular our exceptional Olmsted Brothers legacy of parks and boulevards.

Volunteer Park is the system's undisputed centerpiece, recognized as a National landmark of highest significance for 50 years. Despite the importance of Volunteer Park, the museum's architectural program was developed without considering either the park landscape or users' needs. In this critical way, Seattle Parks abdicated its stewardship responsibility and yielded without scrutiny to an exclusive, self-interested private organization that Seattle taxpayers substantially subsidize. This flawed planning basis has resulted in a deeply flawed design. This outcome is neither satisfactory nor inevitable, as SAM would have you believe from its yearlong monopoly on your attention. Please exercise your authority, independence and good judgment to demand something better, rather than simply settling out of weariness or under pressure.

2. PLEASE RECONSIDER THE DESIGN PROGRAM

Before allowing this project to proceed, the LPB should require that the museum's unilateral, never vetted design program be rigorously scrutinized by knowledgeable parties outside the SAM organization, for the necessity (not desire) to build all proposed spaces and accommodate them exclusively in Volunteer Park and the Gould building. The LPB should press hard for documentation as to why the Volunteer Park expansion is the only viable solution. The litmus for expanding the building should be the public benefit it creates (or conversely, destroys). Neither storage nor conservation facilities serve a direct public "recreational" purpose. It is as a "park recreational facility" that expansion of SAM is being classified as not illegally "taking" park land, despite rarely providing free public access. The park, of course, is free recreational space.

I consider worthy of scrutiny the following programmatic elements:

Mechanical space

Presumably the need for additional mechanical space must be attributable in part to enlarging the building. SAM has never divulged this extra increment as opposed to renovating only or building a more modest addition.

Storage

Additional and existing storage could move off site, as MOHAI has done in its new historic home, also located within a park. This would free up considerable space for more active public use.

Conservation Lab

The proposed conservation lab is probably included in the program as a new draw. It could be housed in SAM's downtown building or elsewhere off site. In fact, half of a single floor of the eight SAM leases to Nordstrom would accommodate the *entire* expansion program, at a fraction the cost of the proposed park addition under review. Nordstrom has, in fact, been actively seeking to divest itself of excess space in the tower. An entire floor stands empty as they consolidate elsewhere downtown. A small buyout seems extremely feasible yet SAM has steadfastly rejected this option, never divulging its cost to do so. Evidence suggests that Nordstrom would happily relinquish space, probably at favorable terms.

Park Lobby

This obtrusive architectural device serves little legitimate purpose other than to provide a dramatic event venue (from which SAM shares no revenue with the City). The Park Lobby's claimed connection to the park works only in one direction, from the inside out. From the outside it intimidates park users and creates unusable dank shade on the ground below. It will generate glare and bird strikes, and unnecessary energy consumption. New gallery space could be accessed easily and graciously from the existing museum interior.

Public Meeting Room vs. Public Restrooms

The first floor meeting space looks suspiciously like a nice new conference room for museum employees. It may serve a double purpose, but did the "public" ever request a meeting room besides what SAAM already offers for community use (at a price)? What Volunteer Park users REALLY cry out for is exterior restrooms to replace those long shut in the original Gould building. These themselves replaced restroom pavilions demolished circa 1930 to make way for museum construction. This fundamental historically established park support function should be reinstated. Access to interior restrooms during museum open hours hardly meets the need, since the museum is open less than half of park open hours and many users would not feel welcome. I consider it mean spirited for SAM to refuse to provide modest public restrooms in its nearly 14,000 square foot addition. Of course "their" building is owned by the City of Seattle.

Art Education Lab vs. Event Space

SAM claims that these uses are totally incompatible. Since the respective uses occur at different times (daytime vs. after hours) complementary usage seems a natural efficiency. The “messy” kid art projects and supplies could easily be concealed and confined behind sliding doors and in a modest storage/support space. While fully separate spaces might be ideal, square footage added to the building takes away precious, historically significant parkland. And in fact the Event Space might be enhanced by some original art by children.

South Asian Gallery vs. Garden Court Gallery

The Garden Court has long functioned as a beautiful display space for sculpture and friezes, most of South Asian origin. Breaking through the East wall to create flow into the proposed Park Lobby will render this space a lobby, not a gallery. The new, ironically South Asian, gallery will only be about 30% larger than the Garden Court gallery space effectively being lost – small gain in public exhibit space for a 13, 850 square foot addition! Is this tradeoff justified, or is the new gallery simply a vanity project?

3. PLEASE INSIST ON REAL ALTERNATIVES

What LMN provided in response to your prior request for alternatives was mostly eyewash and spin, justified by hand picked, heavily directed experts, not independent professionals. There has been no good faith effort to improve upon the design before you, or to prevent negative impacts to either affected landmark you are responsible to protect. SAM has refused to make meaningful design changes for over a year. Improvements have been at the margins, not the heart, of their design. Mitigation measures are disproportionately small in relation to the adverse anticipated impacts. These greatly admired landmarks, and the people of Seattle, deserve better.

Based on expansion projects throughout the world built by prestigious historic museums in heritage surroundings, I am confident that the SAAM design could be greatly improved in both integration and subordination to the Gould building and the Olmsted landscape. One instructive example is the classical Philadelphia Art Museum. An entire, multi-level addition is being constructed underground exclusively within the existing footprint, designed with unusual restraint by famously flamboyant architect Frank Geary. It resides within Olmsted-influenced Fairmont Park.

An array of other low- and no-impact architectural solutions offers inspiration and practical evidence that underground museum expansion works, physically and programmatically. Please visit thinkagainsaam.org to view additional compelling alternatives to throwing a boxy wing on the back of our museum – which is not, by the way, the “back” of the park. It’s a pastoral greensward integral to the Olmsted design.

Since the Volunteer Park site is nearly ideal for underground construction in terms of soil type and drainage, it seems that cost, commitment and low expectations are the real obstacles. As defenders of Seattle’s landmarks, part of your job is to raise expectations. We must factor in the value of park land lost and degraded by above ground expansion to calculate the true cost of construction. I believe building “on the cheap” in such a significant landmark landscape as Volunteer Park to be unconscionable, particularly in face of burgeoning demand for public open space as Seattle booms. The last thing we need is another big box, especially in the heart of a park. Short of leaving town, parks are our only reprieve from relentless construction. Volunteer Park was intended to be a naturalistic landscape park, not a campus to beautify buildings. The

Gould building was an intrusion and a mistake, as were thoughtless subsequent additions. Please don't be complicit in compounding that mistake still further.

4. PLEASE PREVENT ADVERSE IMPACTS TO GOULD BUILDING

While the SAAM addition is inextricably linked to the landmark landscape, it affects the landmark museum building as well, in unfortunate, avoidable ways.

Garden Court

As suggested above, the Garden Court's feel, fabric and function would be adversely impacted by proposed alterations to its historic circulation pattern and insertion of large openings into its intentionally opaque East wall, the climax of which was a semicircular fountain. LMN's architects may want to change or "improve" this space according to their contemporary aesthetic sensibilities, but SAM can accomplish its functional objectives without making destructive alterations.

The Garden Court is specifically identified as a protected interior design feature. This space is the commanding, internally focused core of the museum from which gallery access emanates. Access to a new gallery could be achieved this same way, as the culmination of a series of intervening, pre-existing galleries, particularly if placed in an addition to the south. Multiple circulation routes among galleries could also be preserved, as Gould designed. The Park Lobby route to the proposed South Asian Gallery is awkward, indirect and totally out of keeping with the historic design character. Landmark features should only be altered if fundamentally necessary to sustain the building's intended use.

Library and East Facade

The second floor Library is also a protected character-defining interior feature, which the overhanging Park Lobby would profoundly alter. Although its cantilever has been reduced from 15 to 12.5 feet the recaptured improvement in light levels to the Library would be negligible. On the exterior, Park Lobby cantilevers would obscure the Library's original windows and dominate the entire intact facade. The only original windows on the central East facade would be cast in permanent, deep shadow and be rendered useless to illuminate the room. Good natural light has customarily been a primary feature of Library reading rooms.

Views from within the Library would also be significantly curtailed to the south by doubling the East wing's projection to over 80 feet. People looking out will effectively have blinders on half the original field of vision. The same effect will pertain to the north Jade Gallery, exacerbating view obstruction. From all but the Park Lobby windows, vistas across the park will be diminished.

East Addition

The proposed East wing extension and associated glass cantilevers would make an assertive, non-subordinated contrast to remaining elevations of the original Gould building. While new construction is supposed to be clearly differentiated from historic portions of a building and "of its era" the vocabulary proposed seems like Chinese speaking to Italian. Spanish or French would be far less discordant and overwhelming. I do not believe that one's response to architecture is strictly subjective and in the eyes of the beholder. There are measurable, identifiable characteristics that are either compatible or incompatible, to varying degrees: scale, massing, articulation, fenestration, materials, etc. To my eye the addition has almost nothing meaningful in common with the historic building or expressive of its museum identity. The vocabulary comes from office buildings and airports. I find it hard to imagine that the architects, SAM or LPB members really consider this a well-integrated, sensitive architectural solution. The Emperor has no clothes. Please speak up.

5. PLEASE REFUTE & REMEDY “MODEST” LANDSCAPE IMPACTS

The SAAM addition is not trivial. I will scream if I ever hear the phrase “proposed modest addition” again. It has been a mantra of SAM proponents, repeated lockstep by project boosters. What it belies is any appreciation for the art and defining elements of landscape design. To say that the footprint of the addition is only 3,500 square feet or some infinitesimal percentage of park acreage obfuscates all the other important dimensions of the Olmsted landscape that would be profoundly damaged by its construction. This cultivated blindness is disingenuous and manipulative, or at minimum naïve and unobservant.

Cultural landscapes are poorly understood by many, if not most, people. Landscape features are harder to recognize as intentionally designed spaces than buildings, and because unseen are undervalued. *The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes* is a helpful aid to cultivating a vocabulary, an approach and an enhanced appreciation for designed heritage landscapes like Volunteer Park. Anne Knight, Susan Dolan and I went to some lengths to put this key reference in your hands. I hope you all by now have delved into this guide, and that you will continue to use it when you encounter future landscape landmarks. Having started as an architect myself, I recognize how hard it is to broaden one’s perception of design from objects to spaces, from figure to ground, from static to motion and change.

Volunteer Park is probably the most significant designed landscape to come before the LPB for a Certificate of Approval authorizing substantive changes. Volunteer Park has been valued more highly and for decades longer as a National Register property than the 1933 Art Deco museum. It is also much older and its designer far more famous. My observation is that despite this distinguished stature SAM, LMN and the LPB seem more conversant and comfortable focusing on the building than the Olmsted landscape, with worrisome consequences looming.

The importance of Volunteer Park and your role in protecting its integrity cannot be overstated. If you grant this project a COA as currently submitted, you will facilitate the unnecessary destruction of part of this esteemed landmark to accommodate new construction of dubious justification. As much as possible, landmarks are to be protected for the long haul, just as public parks are to be protected in trust forever.

What is so important about this bit of Volunteer Park that it warrants rejecting this COA application? It’s all in the placement, not just the land lost to building. The SAAM addition would adversely affect the entire greensward that occupies the East half of the park and thus:

- diminish the continuity of the overall Olmsted park design
- mar and obstruct vistas short and long
- visually intrude on what JC Olmsted intended as a building-free setting
- disrupt free flow of movement through the landscape
- relegate precious sunlit areas to shadow
- destroy the secluded, restorative, naturalistic atmosphere, and
- impair survival of heritage trees that are key character-defining features.

This list is probably incomplete but remarkably long and consequential as it is. Changes in the addition’s size, geometry or location could reduce, even eliminate, several of these adverse impacts. Expanding underground would all but eliminate them.

6. PLEASE RECOGNIZE VOLUNTEER PARK'S SIGNIFICANCE AND FRAGILITY

Volunteer Park is a direct line descendent from Central Park, a microcosm of its identifying features. To wit:

- Both parks integrate naturalistic and formal elements
- Both carefully orchestrate movement through and among spaces
- Both are the result of careful, unseen shaping
- Both feature greenswards and open meadows for passive recreation
- Both have formal spines, the Concourse here, the Mall there
- Both beautifully incorporate existing reservoirs
- Both foster social interaction as well as personal respite from urban pressure
- Both are beautiful, highly intentional designs
- Both have proven durable and timeless, but vulnerable to incremental change.
- Both are the irreplaceable centerpieces of their cities

Central Park and Prospect Park (in Brooklyn) are themselves descended from Birkenhead in Liverpool, the first free public landscape park in history. These all ultimately derive from the English country estate landscapes of Capability Brown, coupled with a passion for democratic green space accessible to all. Frederick Law Olmsted visited Birkenhead shortly before co-designing Central Park with Calvert Vaux. The Greensward Plan was his first commission.

Olmsted maintained an unswerving commitment to landscape as art, respite and societal necessity throughout his life. He transmitted his vision, values and craft to his elder son, John Charles, who worked with him for 20 years then inherited the firm with his younger brother Rick. John Charles brought from Boston all this experience and perspective, and imbued them in Volunteer Park. This is a later but not a lesser Olmsted masterwork, a treasure to honor and protect in this no longer provincial corner of the country.

The Central Park Conservancy has been working fervently to restore, maintain and protect Olmsted's timeless landscape amid an ever growing, evolving population. The Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board plays a vital role in supporting equivalent objectives here, keeping a keen eye on consistency with the big picture through each proposed change to the park. It is not easy work, but vital. Now is a time for maintaining the vision Volunteer Park embodies, rather than succumbing to distractions that could cumulatively destroy this remarkable Seattle landmark.

Thank you for your dedication and willingness to make tough decisions on behalf of historic resources that depend on your vigilance and vision to survive.



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