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John C. Olmsted
John Charles Olmsted
Alaska-Yukon Magazine - November 1906

Who was Olmsted?

John Charles Olmsted (1852-1920) and his cousin and step-brother, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., formed the Olmsted Brothers landscape architecture firm in 1898, after Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., retired. The father of landscape architecture, Olmsted, Sr., is best known for his designs of Central Park and Prospect Park in New York City. The Olmsted firms planned or designed over 6,000 projects during their hundred years of existence.

Starting in 1903 when he planned Seattle's Park and Boulevard System, John Charles Olmsted and his associate partner, James Frederick Dawson, were the firm's principal designers working on Seattle projects. Olmsted came frequently to Seattle and the Northwest until 1911. Dawson then handled the clients until the 1940s.

The A-Y-P Grounds and Olmsted's Vision

At the urgent request of the A-Y-P Exposition organizing committee, John C. Olmsted returned to Seattle in October 1906 to create a plan for the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. Local anticipation for the exposition was so great that he wrote to his wife that he "was interrupted ... by visitors. There is naturally a good deal of interest in the plan of the exposition, especially on the part of local real estate speculators."

Olmsted's first draft extended the grounds down to the lakeshores, allowing substantial space between buildings in order to incorporate as much existing forest or undergrowth as possible. He returned to the drawing board and tightened up the plan. The UW Board of Regents approved the preliminary plan (see newspaper article below) on November 5, 1906, and gave final approval to his plan for the grounds in May 1907 (see pages 10 & 12 for comparison with the final layout).

Olmsted organized the grounds around several axes, three of which relied on the

distant landscape features for their focus, a design principle called "borrowed landscape." Rainier Vista began at Cascade Court and drew visitors' gazes to Mount Rainier in the distance. The Lake Washington and Lake Union vistas featured views of the lakes framed by Douglas firs. Straight avenues, radiating out from the central courts, led to circles around which the buildings clustered. One sweeping, curved avenue connected Nome and Klondike circles (Stevens Way).

Olmsted reserved a 100-acre tract in the southeast corner of the grounds for the Park, a forest with five miles of trails and rustic benches. He envisioned this space as a place of respite from the excitement and noise of the exposition.

The Fair That Will Be Ready

Most world's fairs of this era opened on time, but with substantial portions of their attractions unfinished. Seattle was intent not to disappoint visitors who would travel from afar.

THE SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 1906.

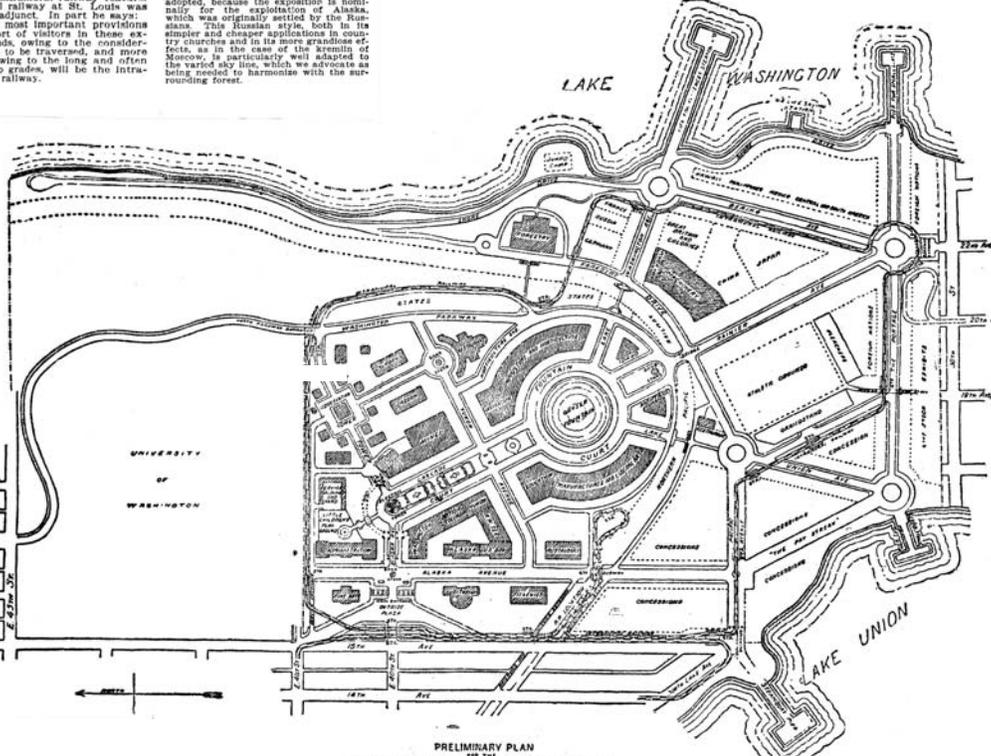
DESIGN FOR THE ALASKA-YUKON-PACIFIC GROUNDS, BY MR. JOHN C. OLMSTED, FAMOUS LANDSCAPE GARDENER

Style of Architecture

"With regard to a style of architecture that should predominate in the principal exposition buildings, our suggestion would be that the ancient Russian style be adopted, because the exposition is nominally for the exploitation of Alaska, which was originally settled by the Russians. This Russian style, both in its simpler and cheaper applications in country churches and in its more grandiose effects, as in the case of the Kremlin of Moscow, is particularly well adapted to the vast site, which we advocate as being needed to harmonize with the surrounding forest."

Intramural Railway

Mr. Olmsted's report has considerable force on the intramural railway feature. An intramural railway at St. Louis was a structure of great interest. It was one of the most important provisions for the comfort of visitors in the exposition grounds, owing to the consideration of the universal exhibition, particularly owing to the long and often highly steep grades, will be the intramural electric railway.



"We have noticed that in several important positions the location of the intramural railway appears to have been somewhat rather than an integral part of the original plan, or rise the desire to add a more or less important building of such a railway among important buildings or to avoid the necessity of being obliged to overhead or subway crossings of the principal thoroughfares, has led to the location of the intramural railway so far from many of the most important buildings and points of interest as to greatly diminish its value as a matter of convenience to visitors."

"While we feel it is necessary, owing to the great size of the site, to adopt a larger number, to adopt a strictly formal general plan for the disposition of buildings, and for the principal avenues, we should expect to have minor roads and walks and many of the smaller buildings treated in a more informal and picturesque manner."

In connection with the report there is given a description of the grounds and design, as well as a ward plan, showing how the completed design will strike the beholder. It is as follows: The exposition will occupy 50 acres of rare attractive, embracing 50 acres of the corner of the University of Washington, and the principal exposition structures will be situated directly south of the college buildings. The site is twenty minutes by street car from the business center of Seattle, and is within the city limits, in the heart of one of the most beautiful sections. It has a water frontage of nearly a mile on Lake Washington, and a depth of half a mile, with 20 feet of beach on Lake Union. The grounds are high and light, averaging an elevation of 100 feet above Lake Union. The general slope is toward the narrow neck of land which separates them. In general, it would be desirable to have the lower portions of the site, except at entrances, comparatively plain, and to have the windows uniformly high above the ground and to concentrate the decorative effects as much as possible around the doorways, around the cornice lines and in the upper parts of pinnacles, towers and the like. It will often be preferable in effect to have broken sky lines with domes and minarets and other such to have very simple, massive walls, because such a treatment would better harmonize with the multiplicity of the apex-like fir trees.

PRELIMINARY PLAN OF THE ALASKA-YUKON-PACIFIC EXPOSITION SEATTLE, WASH., 1906.

Scale: 1" = 100'
1" = 1/2 MILE

"Rainier Avenue forms the main axis of the exposition, dividing into two approximately equal parts the section of the exposition site which is appropriate for the placing of exhibit structures. The two largest buildings will be placed on either side of the fountain court, which is located by the avenue. They will be built around an arc, with wings to the north, and will be similar in size and design, being about 500 feet long by 150 feet wide. The wings referred to are in reality separate buildings, constructed as additions merely for the sake of architectural effect. The big building east, which enters the grounds from the west, forms a large arc, running for a distance nearly parallel with the Fountain court. In the spaces beyond the tracks, there is room for many buildings. The machinery hall, in which will be installed the electrical displays and transportation exhibits, is situated just beyond the tracks in the main triangle. In connection with it is the power house, which, being open to visitors, will constitute a most interesting electrical and machinery display. The situation of the machinery, especially well chosen, as the railroad track which passes close to it makes the building convenient, so that the great engines and mammoth cranes can be installed without difficulty."

"The main entrance of the fair is to be at Parthenon street, from which it is only a short walk to the Rainier avenue axis. At the left of the entrance will stand the fine arts palace and at the right the auditorium. The Fisheries building, beyond the auditorium. The administration building is situated at a short distance from the entrance, on the left, and across the way from it is the Washington building, to which is added the British Columbia building, and then in succession the structures devoted to displays from Yukon, the Northwest territory, the United States government and Alaska, the whole forming a roughly triangular area surrounding a triangular inner court."

"If you have followed the description given, you will see that Lake Washington and Lake Union avenues and the continuation of the Parthenon street axis divides the south end of the grounds into two triangles of equal size. The side of the triangle not specified is supplied, to the east, by a street called Parthenon street, and to the west by the Portage. At the corner of the triangle adjoining the Fountain court there are cozy locations for state buildings, and these spaces have been assigned provisionally to Idaho and Montana."

"The Northern Pacific narrow gauge, which enters the grounds from the west, forms a large arc, running for a distance nearly parallel with the Fountain court. In the spaces beyond the tracks, there is room for many buildings. The machinery hall, in which will be installed the electrical displays and transportation exhibits, is situated just beyond the tracks in the main triangle. In connection with it is the power house, which, being open to visitors, will constitute a most interesting electrical and machinery display. The situation of the machinery, especially well chosen, as the railroad track which passes close to it makes the building convenient, so that the great engines and mammoth cranes can be installed without difficulty."

"An observation tower, situated in this section, from which it will be possible to obtain an unobstructed view of the grounds and of the magnificent mountain scenery about Seattle, will constitute an unusual feature. The tower building, which, it is planned, will be a structure unique and attractive in design, will have a location near the shore of Lake Washington, adjoining a number of the pavilions of seven governments. Pursued south on the lake shore, space has been left for Hawaii, the Philippines, Mexico and the republics of Central and South America."

"The amusement street, corresponding to the trail at the Lewis and Clark exposition and the Pike at St. Louis, will parallel the shore of Lake Union between it and the lake will be a number of concrete walks, which will be joined by a body of water, other shows will be situated to the north of the amusement street. The grounds have been laid out in a big square south of the main entrance from the second track. An intramural railway, a convenience which has not been provided for at other expositions, will extend around the entire grounds, it has been laid out so that it will permit easy access to the principal buildings, and will be two miles long."



VIEW FROM NATURAL AMPHITHEATER LOOKING TOWARD LAKE WASHINGTON

Natural Features of The Fair

By JOHN C. OLMSTED, Landscape Architect

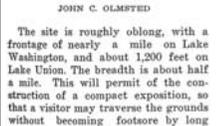
EDITORS NOTE—Mr. Olmsted, of the firm of Olmsted & Bros., of Brookline, Massachusetts, noted landscape artists, laid out the grounds of the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago, and the Lewis and Clark Exposition at Portland. He has also designed public and private parks in many of the cities of this country.

THE Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909 will be distinguished from other fairs by the rare attractiveness of its location. This alone will do much to make the fair a success. The exposition grounds, which embrace 250 acres of the unused portion of the campus of the University of Washington, provide excellent opportunities for attractive landscape effects. The principal part of the grounds—the place where most of the exposition structures will stand—is about 100 feet above Lake Union, the highest point being 150 feet above sea level. Lake Union is eight feet above sea level.



SHOWING VIRGIN STATE OF GROUNDS

In the Science Quadrangle the principal building will be the state museum, and the other structures would be devoted to chemistry, physics, electricity, botany and zoology. The mechanical engineering building above referred to would have its principal front on this quadrangle. The civil engineering building would come between this quadrangle and Fifteenth Avenue. The Northern Pacific Railway track skirts Lake Union, then crosses over to Union Bay of Lake Washington, and runs roughly parallel with the shore of that body. In so doing, it describes a large half-loop about the university, leaving a considerable space between the buildings and the track. In this space, to the south of the present administration buildings, it is likely that most of the exhibit palaces will be located. Other structures, such as state buildings, may conveniently be placed so that they will occupy a position in the general university scheme as outlined by me in the plan for the campus. It will be necessary to build bridges where the walks and drives cross the tracks, except in one or two instances where subways would serve the purpose better. It is likely that the amusement concessions will occupy positions beyond the track, and the livestock show may also be placed in this area. A natural amphitheater, in the steep slope above the railroad, near the shore of Union Bay, may, almost without modification, be made to serve an excellent purpose as a place for great gatherings. The grounds are as yet practically in their natural condition, and it is likely that considerable portions of them will be left so, as the cost of elaborate landscape gardening would be prohibitive. This, however, will afford an unique charm to the general effect, especially in the case of visitors from the arid plains and from the East. The magnificent views of Mt. Rainier and other mountains of Lake Washington, and of Lake Union will, however, be by far the greatest features of the exposition and will be vividly remembered by most visitors when the best efforts of architects and landscape gardeners have been forgotten.



JOHN C. OLMSTED

The site is roughly oblong, with a frontage of nearly a mile on Lake Washington, and about 1,200 feet on Lake Union. The breadth is about half a mile. This will permit of the construction of a compact exposition, so that a visitor may traverse the grounds without becoming footsore by long walks. It is planned to use at least a part of the exposition structures after the fair, as college buildings, and the problem will be how best to construct them so that they may be big enough for exhibiting exhibits, and yet substantial, artistic in design, and adapted to use as halls of learning. The plan I laid out two years ago for the university campus placed the library and gymnasium on either side of Forty-first Street, facing Fifteenth Avenue. Between them would be the Arts Entrance. It is natural to presume that most of the students will live in boarding-houses nearby, west of the university campus, so that on route to the recreation halls they would pass the library and gymnasium, both of which would thus be exceedingly convenient. I gave the Art Institute (proposed) the place of prominence at the head of the Arts Quadrangle, a quadrangle larger than that of any other college of my acquaintance. The Arts Quadrangle would be 700 feet across, roughly shaped like a horseshoe, with the dormitories, five in number, regularly placed about the northeast end, opposite the Art Institute. Two of these dormitories now stand there. On one side of the quadrangle would stand the existing science and administration buildings, and on the other the languages, medicine, law and mechanical engineering buildings.

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A BIT OF SHORE LINE, ALASKA-YUKON-PACIFIC EXPOSITION GROUNDS

Meeting the Budget
By the time the initial plan for the grounds of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition was published on November 18, 1906, Olmsted had already reduced the size of the area of the fair to accommodate budget restrictions. He returned in April 1907 (staying until June 1907) to work with John Galen Howard, supervising architect, to fine-tune the design and bring the plan within shrinking budget constraints. Fortunately, C. J. Smith, Chairman of Buildings and Grounds, succeeded in maintaining the \$380,000 needed for grounds construction.

SPEAKING OF BUDGET
Please join or renew your membership in Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks and help support stewardship efforts of Seattle's Olmsted legacy.
Mail checks of Seattle: Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks P.O. Box 9884, Seattle, WA 98109
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