



Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks

P.O. BOX 9884, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98109-0884
SEATTLEOLMSTED.ORG FRIENDS@SEATTLEOLMSTED.ORG

To: Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation
Friends of Colman Park Vista

cc: Board of Park Commissioners

From: Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks

Date: September 13, 2017

RE: **Historical Context of the Colman Park Vista**

The Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks has been asked to provide a report on the existence and extent of the "historical context" of the vista along 31st Ave. South at the Western edge of Colman Park. It is our understanding that this "historical context" will be a part of the proposed Colman Park Vista Vegetation Management Plan, as required by the Department's Tree Management, Maintenance, Pruning and/or Removal Policy and Procedures (effective as of June 1, 2001).

History of Seattle Parks and Boulevards

In 1903 John Charles Olmsted, of the nationally renowned landscape architectural firm Olmsted Brothers, was employed by the City of Seattle to develop a Parks and Boulevards Master Plan. The purpose of the Plan was to capture a variety of park spaces for various recreational uses, along with a series of scenic boulevards and parkways that would connect many of these larger parks. These roadways were envisioned as providing additional opportunities for leisurely recreation and scenic vistas of both distant views, such as Lake Washington and Mt. Rainier, and internal views of the parks themselves. In the 1903 Olmsted report, Olmsted explained that "*the proposed parkways are located so as to be of the greatest possible immediate advantage to the existing population, as well as to secure for all time convenient access to a great number of exceedingly fine view points, to preserve sufficient areas of the beautiful natural woods, and to provide a sufficiently continuous and long series of pleasure drives.*" ("Original Report of the Olmsted Brothers," as published in *Parks, Playground and Boulevards of Seattle Washington*, Board of Park Commissioners, 1909, p. 81.)

In practice and philosophy, Olmsted identified locations and designed settings throughout Seattle that furthered a sense of "genius of place," to embrace and enhance the uniqueness of

Seattle's geography. He saw in Seattle remarkable opportunities for invoking a unique sense of place through capturing and preserving both distant and nearer views – distant views to the water bodies and mountains, and nearer views to neighborhoods and area topography and vegetation. In his words:

Seattle possesses extraordinary landscape advantages in having a great abundance and variety of water views and views of wooded hills and distant mountains and snow-capped peaks In designing a system of parks and parkways the primary aim should be to secure and preserve for the use of the people as much as possible of these advantages of water and mountain views and of woodlands. (Ibid., 73.)

Included in the Olmsted Master Plan was a recommendation for a “crestline parkway” that would extend along the top of the ridge nearest the shores of Lake Washington. Olmsted recommended that, “from the city south boundary to the north side of Madrona Park practically all the steep hillside and shore of the lake should be [purchased], with enough land on top of the steep slope to afford room for a crestline parkway.” (*Ibid.*, 74.)

As it relates to the parks proposed in the area southeast of downtown Seattle, including the area that now includes Colman Park, Olmsted explained his vision further:

The largest scheme, and undoubtedly the most profitable one for the city and those owning land near it, would be . . . to provide for a fine crest line parkway extending from Thirty-fifth avenue and James street to the saddle in the ridge which is about south-southwest of the pumping station [which is generally located today at the southwest terminus of Mt. Baker Boulevard]. At this saddle the crest line parkway would connect with the Beacon Hill Parkway. From this saddle a parkway would be carried with an easy down grade along the east side of the ravine north of the saddle and around the north end of the spur and then south along the slope of the hill to the city's south boundary, where it would connect with the Lake Washington Parkway, if that is ever carried to Bailey Peninsula [now known as Seward Park], or, if not, with an avenue in a regular subdivision. All the land between the crest line and hillside parkways and the shore of the lake would be included in this scheme. (Ibid., 86.)

In Olmsted's recommendation of other options for this part of the park and boulevard proposal, Olmsted states that the hillside and lakeshore acquired should be “sufficient to control the view,” suggesting that Olmsted envisioned that views along the proposed route would be preserved and actively maintained. (*Ibid.*, 86.)

The Olmsted Brothers recognized how ambitious was their entire 1903 proposal and so further in this plan they presented a financial argument for the land purchase and view

preservation. They describe economic as well as scenic advantages of a ridgeline parkway adjacent to park property as follows:

The Crest Parkway, which has already been suggested, should form the top border or western boundary of this park. It should be laid out above the slide, on the land which has heretofore remained undisturbed. This matter of a parkway on the crest of the hill in this section is a serious one It will probably strike almost anyone at first as an extravagant outlay, but considering the experience of other cities with similar parkways along the crests of hills commanding similar views, there can be no doubt that, whatever the cost of this parkway may be, it will be far more than repaid to the city . . . by the increased taxes which would be received from the adjoining property, and from other properties in the vicinity west of it. (Ibid, 89.)

Colman Park Vista

Olmsted's ambitious recommendation to capture all of the steep hillsides and to build a crestline parkway was never entirely realized and by 1909 the idea was put aside as other properties and boulevard connections were being developed. But when looking at the Olmsted Brothers' 1910 conceptual plan for Colman Park, it is apparent that Olmsted was still intent on providing viewing areas along this ridgeline roadway. (See the attached "Preliminary Plan for Colman Park"¹ and "Plan Enlargement of the Western Boundary.") Although their plan appears to include some copses of trees along the park's western boundary, the majority of the vegetation proposed seems to be lower-growing vegetation,² consistent with both the lighter penwork used and the Olmsted Brothers' desire to capture public views along this crestline. The resulting expansive view areas are also in keeping with their practice and philosophy to create a changing experience as one travels through a landscape, folding in moments of discovery and dynamic, shifting views as part of that experience.

Conclusion

We thus conclude that in 1910 the Olmsted Brothers designed Colman Park to include expansive, framed views to Lake Washington and Mt. Rainier at the park's western boundary along 31st Ave South, reflecting broader goals and intents described in their 1903 plan for Seattle's parks and boulevards. A majority of the proposed vegetation appears lower-growing to maintain views, while select groupings of trees were retained to provide some view variety along

¹ It was customary for the Board of Park Commissioners to commission the Olmsted Brothers to develop preliminary plans for parks and boulevards that were to be implemented by city employees, so a plan titled "preliminary" is often the final or primary plan for a landscape. This is the case with Colman Park.

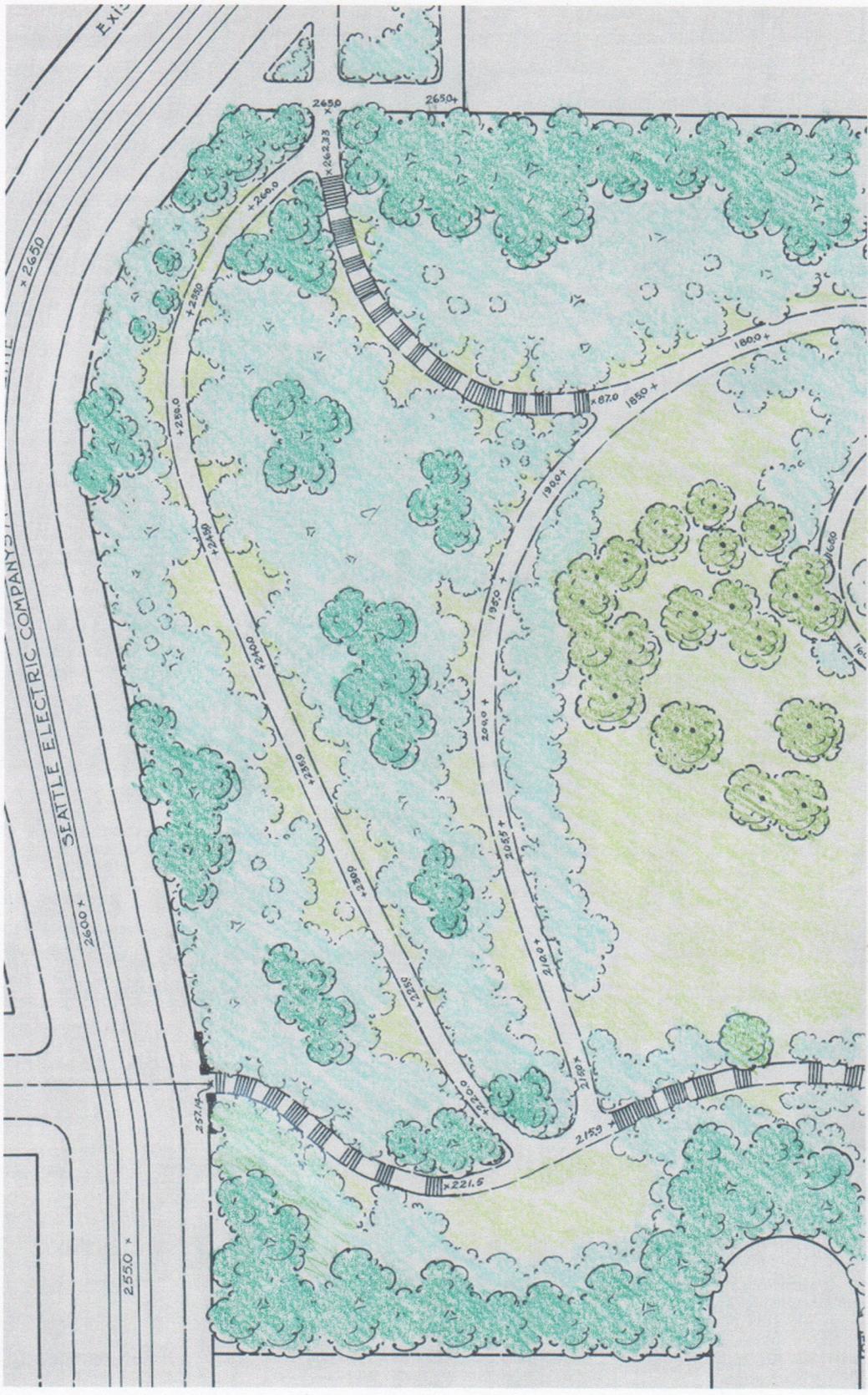
² The 1910 survey of the site that provided the base for the Olmsted plan identifies "small trees and heavy underbrush" on the upper slope. Olmsted may well have intended to "edit" remnants of existing vegetation, a practical solution consistent with his love of Northwest native species.

this stretch of 31st Ave. These public vistas are consistent with the Olmsted Brothers' larger intent to incorporate Seattle's "genius of place" by capturing and maintaining views made by this city's geography and location. The existence and extent of these views are the "historical context" in which to evaluate any proposed vegetation management plan for Colman Park.



HOLGATE

GRAND



TREES

TALL SHRUBS OR TREES
SHRUBS / "UNDERBRUSH"

LAWN