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Olmsted Parks in Spokane

Nearly all Spokane's many beautiful parks and parkways were first conceived by a legendary firm in park design and urban planning: the Olmsted Brothers, Landscape Architects, of Brookline, Massachusetts, of New York's Central Park fame. In 1907, Aubrey L. White (1868-1948), the first president of the young city's new Park Board, was determined to make Spokane into a model of modern park planning. White discovered that John Charles Olmsted (1852-1920) was making trips out west to oversee other projects in the Northwest, so convinced Olmsted to make stopovers in Spokane. On these trips Olmsted and his associates roamed the city's bluffs, river gorge, and forests. His firm issued a report in 1908 proposing an ambitious plan that called for four massive new parks, five smaller local parks, 11 playfields, numerous parkways, and major improvements to 10 existing parks. Many of these recommendations were put into effect following the passage of a \$1 million bond issue in 1910. By 1913, the city had multiplied its park acreage tenfold. Today, many of Spokane's best-known public spaces, including the Finch Arboretum, High Bridge Park, and Downriver Park, owe their existence to the Olmsted report. Even pre-existing parks, including Manito Park, owe much of their aesthetic appeal to Olmsted suggestions. Olmsted even foresaw that the city would one day reclaim the downtown riverfront, which became Riverfront Park in 1974. A century after the report was drafted, Spokane's park planners and civic activists still look to the Olmsted Report for guidance.

Urban Beauty

The Olmsted Brothers, Landscape Architects, were the most famous urban planners in America at a time when the term "urban planner" hadn't even been invented. Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. (1822-1903) was responsible for New York's Central Park, the U.S. Capitol Grounds, and the famous Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893.

He died in 1903, but his firm carried on under his son, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., and his nephew, John Charles Olmsted. The cousins, who were also stepbrothers,

became famous in their own right for championing the City Beautiful movement, dedicated to urban planning and beautification.

In 1907, the youthful Spokane was ripe for beautification. Aubrey L. White, the president of the city's new Park Board, was filled with enthusiasm for the City Beautiful movement, and he also felt a sense of urgency. Because Spokane was growing so fast, he felt that the city had to act immediately if it were to acquire parkland cheaply and avoid the mistakes of the big cities back east.

He knew the Olmsteds were designing projects in Seattle and Portland, so he hired the firm to stop off in Spokane to prepare a report for the city.

The Visit and the Report

Over several visits in 1907 and 1908, White accompanied John Charles Olmsted or his associate, James Frederick Dawson, all over the city -- to the river gorge, to Manito Park, to Indian Canyon, to Corbin Park. Those two men took notes for their report, but they did more than that. According to local historian John Fahey, White paid Olmsted an extra \$50 out of his own pocket to dispense as much verbal advice as he could give. Olmsted and Dawson went back to their offices in Brookline, Massachusetts and prepared a comprehensive report for what today seems an absurdly low price of \$1,000.

The report began by expressing the basics of the Olmsted philosophy, which included several themes that are evident in Spokane today. First, they believed that every home, from humble to grand, should be within easy walking distance of a neighborhood park. A map of Spokane's current parks system shows parks dotted almost perfectly evenly, north to south, east to west.

Second, they believed that the more parks, the better.

The Olmsteds believed that "city life ... has a decidedly depressing effect on the general health and stamina" (Olmsted). The city dweller has to put up with noise, factories, crowds and constant bustle.

"Even to the well, this is tiring to the nerves," said the report. "But to those who are delicate, it often becomes a torture. After all, it is to those whose nerves are tired -- and they are a large proportion of the dwellers in a city -- that the parks are most immediately beneficial" (Olmsted).

So they recommended at least 20 new parks, in addition to the 10 already in existence.

They also believed that a great deal of parkland should be left natural and undeveloped, especially large parks on the edges of the city. The report said that large "reservations of country scenery" become more and more necessary as cities grow. Large, natural parks "offer inducements for the people to walk reasonable distances amid agreeable, nerve-resting surroundings" (Olmsted).

Today, Spokane holds huge swaths of parkland that are essentially wild, including Palisades Park, on the city's western rimrocks and Hangman Park, between High Drive and Latah Creek.

Spokane's Olmsted Parks

The report had many specific recommendations, including four new, large parks:

- Gorge Park -- Covering the banks of the Spokane River downstream from the falls all the way to the Natatorium Park site, at the approximate spot where Boone Street would intersect the river. The Olmsteds recognized early that this gorge "is a tremendous feature of the landscape and one which is rarer in a large city than river, lake, bay or mountain" (Olmsted). The railroad-jammed downtown riverfront, above the falls, was not part of the Olmsted plan, but only because, as the Olmsteds dryly noted, it had "already been partially 'improved,' as one might ironically say, but it is questionable whether any considerable proportion of the community is proud of most of those improvements" (Olmsted). Yet they predicted that the city would someday come to its senses and reclaim the area.
- Upriver Park -- A huge area on both banks of the Spokane River beginning at about Havana and extending east.
- Downriver Park -- The river gorge downstream from Natatorium Park, mostly on the river's north bank.
- Latah Park -- A huge swath of land from the mouth of Latah Creek upstream to the present Creek at Qualchan Golf Course, including the bluff between High Drive and the creek.

The Olmsted Report also called for a number of new, somewhat smaller "local parks," including:

- Rockwood Park -- Near Rockwood Boulevard and Southeast Boulevard.
- Queen Anne Park -- In a ravine west of Latah Creek and below Garden Springs.
- Ravine Park -- Extending along both sides of a steep ravine high above the confluence of Latah Creek and the Spokane River.
- West Heights Park -- On the wooded heights high above Greenwood Cemetery.
- Eastside Park -- Along the Spokane River, from about Freya Street upstream to Upriver Park.

Then the report recommended a whopping 11 playfields, scattered evenly about the city, including Logan, Lidgerwood, Sinto, Underhill, and Hays playfields.

"There is no question but that the land in the playfields will be worth all its cost to the present generation, who will pay for it, even if it is only graded and smoothed to enable the boys to play ball upon it," said the report (Olmsted).

Olmsted-Recommended Improvements

The Olmsted Report also had detailed recommendations for improving the city's existing parks, including:

- Manito Park -- Expand the park, put in playfields, make better aesthetic use of the dramatic rock ledges, and lose (as soon as possible) the zoo.
- Corbin Park -- Add a pretty shelter house in the center, tennis courts, playgrounds and winding walkways.
- Adams Park (soon renamed Cannon Hill Park) -- Create a willow-shaded pond, a curved drive, a little brook, a rock footbridge, and a shelter.
- Liberty Park -- Add a lake, playfields and tennis courts.

The Olmsteds supplemented these suggestions with elegant drawings of several parks, notably Corbin, Cannon Hill, and Liberty parks. The drawings are works of art in themselves.

They also suggested a system of parkways, such as Upriver Parkway, Manito Boulevard, and Rockwood Boulevard (the Olmsteds had been privately retained to design the entire Rockwood neighborhood). The Olmsteds also made suggestions about Spokane's street design -- they were highly in favor of diagonal boulevards such as Northwest Boulevard and Southeast Boulevard.

Aubrey White's Park Project

The report was submitted to the Park Board in 1908, with absolutely zero fanfare. White kept it quiet because he was worried that landowners would jack up their prices if they knew about the report. White proceeded to quietly acquire as much land as he could.

"He did things you could never do today," said Sally Reynolds, a Spokane historic preservation consultant and an Olmsted authority. "He would put his own money down to hold land and hope to get repaid. And he cajoled all of his influential friends to donate land as well" (Reynolds).

Yet to acquire the amount of land recommended by the Olmsteds -- an impressive 1,953 acres -- would require serious money in the form of a bond issue. White and

the other board members immediately floated a \$1 million bond issue, which eventually passed in 1910 by a margin of only 18 votes.

By 1913, when the Park Board finally released the Olmsted Report to the public, White proudly wrote that the board had already "carried out the recommendations of the Olmsted Bros., and by purchase and donation, have increased the public park area of Spokane from 173 acres to 1,934 acres."

Not every recommendation was carried out exactly. Some compromises were necessary due to the difficulty of land acquisition and to the fact that the \$1 million bond issue was reduced to \$888,982 due to litigation. Many other changes took place later as the city evolved over the decades.

Spokane's Parks Today

Yet a large proportion of Spokane's parks can be traced back to the Olmsted's recommendations, although now they are often known by different names. Here's how some of those Olmsted-recommended parks have evolved up to the present:

- Gorge Park -- This area now consists of the 200-acre High Bridge Park and the Herbert M. Hamblen Conservation Area.
- Meanwhile, in the 1970s, the city did finally come to its senses in regards to its downtown riverfront. The railroad tracks were ripped out and the area reclaimed as part of Expo '74 to become Riverfront Park, one of the city's showcase parks.
- Upriver Park -- The area south of the river was briefly made into Spokane's first public golf course, Upriver Golf Course, but in 1916 was converted into Spokane's first airfield, now called Felts Field. The part north of the river now includes the 147-acre Upriver Park Conservation Land, Camp Sekani Park and Minnehaha Rocks.
- Downriver Park -- This is now the 95-acre Downriver Park Conservation Land and Downriver Golf Course.
- Latah Park -- Qualchan Hills Park and the Creek at Qualchan Golf Course now occupy large areas along the creek. High Drive Parkway and the 292-acre undeveloped Hangman Park occupy the bluff areas above.
- Rockwood Park -- Is today the 51-acre Lincoln Park.
- Queen Anne Park -- Is today the 56-acre Finch Arboretum
- Ravine Park -- Is today Indian Canyon Golf Course, the undeveloped 155-acre Indian Canyon Park and part of High Bridge Park.
- West Heights Park -- Is now the 464-acre Palisades Park, on the rimrocks above the city's west side.
- Eastside Park -- It was never acquired, and Spokane Community College sits on part of that land. However, land on or near the recommended site is now Upriver Drive Parkway, Minnehaha Park, Esmeralda Golf Course, and part of the Centennial Trail.

Many of the playfields recommended by the report are still in existence today. Those include Hays, Logan Peace, and Underhill parks. The two Lidgerwood playfields became Byrne Park and Glass Park. Sinto Park is now Chief Garry Park.

Many of the parks that already existed in 1907 still retain evidence of the improvements suggested by the Olmsteds:

- Cannon Hill Park -- Now home to ducks, thanks to the pond designed by the Olmsteds. The rock bridge over a second small wading pond now spans only grass. Yet this is the Spokane park that continues to most clearly reflect the Olmsted aesthetic.
- Liberty Park -- Became one of Spokane's prettiest parks; was later truncated by Interstate 90.
- Corbin Park -- The original recommendation -- playfields, tennis courts, a bandstand -- was shot down by neighbors who wanted a small, quiet "beauty spot." Olmsted drew a revised design with curved paths and a never-installed central fountain and "mirror basin." The rest of the park retains a few Olmsted touches.
- Manito Park -- Although not designed by the Olmsteds, today's park incorporates many of their verbal suggestions, including the curved drives and walkways. The Olmsted touch is also evident in the park's stone buildings and gardens. Spokane's first park superintendent, John Duncan (who built Duncan Gardens, one of the park's main attractions), gave Manito a distinct Olmsted-like flavor after he was hired in 1910. He was an Olmsted devotee from Boston.

Spokane's Olmsted Legacy

So it is no exaggeration to say that the visits of Olmsted and Dawson changed the look of Spokane forever. "It set the character of Spokane's parks -- and that character was unmistakable," said Taylor Bressler, manager of planning and development of the city's Parks Department. "A lot of cities would take parks where they could -- but this was a planned effort" (Bressler).

Even today, when planners and activists seek inspiration, they "still pick up that old Olmsted report," said Reynolds (Reynolds). And for inspiration of another kind, thousands of people flock every day to the public spaces of Spokane. The Olmsted legacy surrounds them.

Sources:

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By Jim Kershner, July 18, 2007