The Washington State Capitol Campus and Its Peripatetic Planning
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Identifying all the ingredients affecting the siting, planning, design and construction during the early developmental phases of the Washington State Capitol Campus in Olympia has always been hampered by the disappearance of documents pertaining to that project from the records of its principal architects, the New York City firm of Wilder and White. Following the Depression-related dissolution of their partnership in 1930, shortly after the 1928 closure of initial capitol campus construction, there was a breakup of the firm's files, and those pertaining to the Olympia project were assigned to Wilder who had been the partners' principal representative on that work. The probability is that, after his retirement and later his suicide in 1934, these materials were simply discarded. Thus none of the office copies of the original contract drawings, job records or correspondence is available to anyone interested in tracing the development, construction and related human history associated with Washington's most ambitious effort to create monumental architecture, a project about which Henry-Russell Hitchcock was moved to declare, "the American Renaissance in state capitol building reached its climax."

For the historian seeking information about the campus, the evidence is therefore especially elusive; we are dependent on local collections and materials relating to the project that have been retained by others. More recently, however, some important collateral support has been discovered in the Olmsted Brothers papers held by the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C., particularly the records of John C. Olmsted. These materials provide much of the substance from which this article is drawn.

In 1911 Wilder and White had won Washington state's design contract competition, which required competitors to provide a long-range site plan for the Legislative Building. This building was to be the crown jewel in a group of buildings, an innovative and unprecedented approach to American state capitol design which had elsewhere on such occasions confined its focus to the capitol as a single building. The competition had also required that the Legislative Building be oriented to face due north. Recently, however, there have been posed certain critical questions that have remained largely unanswered regarding the partners' campus plan, which may be summarized as follows:

Why, unlike other contestants, did Wilder and White choose to confuse the Legislative Building’s visual accessibility from and to views of Puget Sound with the transverse alignment of the Temple of Justice, particularly when at the same time the axis to the south was being architecturally emphasized but into an area, comprised mostly of privately-owned and substantial residences, that Wilder himself claimed had no distinctive visual amenities? Why were the plan relationships of the accessory buildings of the group not reversed, closing the south axis with the Temple of Justice and dramatizing the one to the north by framing its uninterrupted thrust between the pair of angled buildings?
A tracing of the circumstances that led up to the Wilder and White site plan forms an interesting chapter in the design history of the Washington State Capitol Campus.

While the answers posed by this article are drawn from inferential evidence, they seem nevertheless to clarify in a reasonable way the thinking that led to what one finds today on the Olympia campus and perhaps even help justify its imperfections.

The grounds for the campus had been a donation of Olympia's founder, Edmund Sylvester, who in a characteristic 19th-century gesture to reinforce the attractiveness of his new town plat for potential investors, had included in it a 12-acre site for a future territorial capitol. The territorial legislature accepted the donation in 1855, the following year building on it a two-story wood frame building that was paid for with a $5,000 appropriation from Congress for that purpose. The structure was situated near the current location of the Insurance Building.

In 1889 Washington was granted statehood, but it was not until 1893 that the legislature felt sufficiently prepared to start the ambitious effort toward construction of a permanent state capitol, doing so by announcing a national design competition. The general instructions called for elevations, plans, a section, and a perspective drawing for a building sufficient in size to accommodate all branches of state government. There were 188 submissions from around the country, from which was selected for first prize the proposal of Ernest Flagg, at that time a promising young New York architect who would later earn a national reputation. Flagg's capitol, like those of the few other competitors for whom the record of their submittals is still extant, reflected the influence of the national capitol, adorned affair of rather florid design typical of other state capitols built in the latter half of the 19th century. He sited his building somewhat west of the territorial capitol; his perspective drawing showed it on a modestly raised terrace facing south to an open plaza with a large central reflecting pool and formal planting beds and lawns. There is no evidence of what might have been planned for the balance of the site, nor do we know what he had in mind for the site's connection to the city as a whole.

But Flagg's plan was never realized, a combination of economics and politics being sufficient to halt construction after the basement and foundation walls were in place. Instead, the state in 1901 purchased the then-recently completed Thurston County Courthouse, constructed an addition, and in 1905 occupied it as a state capitol, which it remained for 22 years.

Nearly 20 years elapsed between the 1893 competition and the state's next effort to build a capitol, in 1911 the Washington State Capitol Commission announced another national design competition. There was, however, a significant difference in the program, for this time the commission was seeking proposals not for the design of a single building but for a group of buildings, the state having become convinced by its recent experience with the former courthouse that the spatial demands of government could not reasonably be satisfied by anyone structure.

There appeared to be considerably less interest in the new competition, if the number of entrants is an index: 188 in 1893 versus 30 in 1911, of which 18 were from Washington. The unanimous choice in the three-man architectural jury's advisory to the commission was the proposal from Wilder and White. Thus an essentially unknown architectural partnership began an association with the State of Washington that was to continue for the next 18 years.

Besides the competition program's group plan requirements, there was also the stipulation that the location of the Legislative Building required reuse of the still-existing Flagg foundations but with the new building facing north instead of south and having an approach from that direction as well. Presumably the
commission had second thoughts about the earlier Flagg proposal that had turned its back to the drama of the northward vista toward the Olympia Mountains, opting now to celebrate it. If, indeed, this was their thinking, it is curious that the jury and commission both chose to accept the one group plan (of the seven submittals about which we still have information) that blocked the view from the Legislative Building. For, while the other six contestants grouped their buildings in a variety of configurations all opening without interruption to the north, Wilder and White closed that axis by locating their Temple of Justice (a subsidiary building following the Legislative Building as next in importance) directly across it. As a result, full appreciation of the northward panorama could only be gained by going around to the rear of the Temple of Justice. The plan submitted by Howells and Stokes, another New York firm, which placed second in the competition, was typical of the six also-rans, theirs presuming additional site acquisition to the south.

Even at the time that the award was made to Wilder and White, the commission asked for the architects' observations about the northward orientation. Wilder, in Olympia at the time to sign the contracts, expressed continuing support for the original program, though the emphasis of his analysis was on the question of approaches to the site rather than views from it; he made no reference at all to the presence of the Temple of Justice athwart the northward axis and the violence it did to the potentials of that splendid vista.

There were others, however, willing to question this decision, and it was here that the Olmsted Brothers now entered the scene. The brothers were no strangers to the Pacific Northwest, having done considerable work in the Puget Sound area, especially in Seattle, including their plans for Seattle parks (1903), the University of Washington campus (1904), and the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909. The commission now requested that there be some further study of the site plan and drew the Olmsteds directly into the matter. With regard to their responsibilities, however, one can infer from the correspondence by the parties involved that the views of the Olmsteds on one hand and Wilder and White on the other were imperfectly matched.

From the first visit of John C. Olmsted (partner in charge) to the site on April 13, 1911, it was apparent that he took a dim view of much of what had already been suggested by Wilder and White for the site's future. His notes of that visit record his observations of the impingement of institutional and residential land development south and east of the site, the irregularity of its property lines, and the visual disorder of the railroad and "shabby commercial harbor," all factors that in his mind called for thorough site plan reconsideration. Olmsted was particularly unimpressed with the prospects for an approach and vista development to the north, suggesting that money for a "vast stairway" and the handling of the "ugly middle distance" might better be spent "in improving the connection and approach with and from the central park in which is the capitol [the old courthouse] and with the business center of the city, the hotels, etc., and especially the connection with the R.R. station." Subsequently, Olmsted agreed to visit Olympia and provide "revised plans and grading plans and consulting services for one year."

The Olmsteds' progress, however, was not very satisfactory. Obviously their relationship with Wilder and White was not entirely clear, neither in the minds of the principals of the two firms nor in those of members of the commission. The 1911-12 correspondence of the several parties involved suggests that the prestigious Olmsteds showed no hesitancy in stealing the group plan ball and running with it, leaving the little-known fledgling architects rather on the sidelines in a game whose captaincy they thought had been awarded to them. In particular, the Olmsteds sought to amend the group plan by establishing revised connections of the site to Olympia's center city and relocating the Temple of Justice south rather than north of the Legislative Building. Wilder and White in turn maintained their allegiance to their group plan and especially the northerly location of the Temple of Justice. Both firms appeared to have had equal access to the commission, with each advancing its approach rather independently of the other. The brittleness of the arrangement can be easily understood.
Ultimately it was the commission that would decide, writing on January 11, 1912, to the Olmsteds:

The Commission has felt compelled to decide and has decided to locate the Temple of Justice north of the old foundation.... We do not believe that you would have located the Temple of Justice with its rear immediately against the south line of the property had you not been misled in some way as to the purposes of the Commission in this regard [i.e., its refusal to consider acquisition of additional property along the site's south property line for added spaciousness].

And further to disassociate the commission from the Olmsteds and their proposals, by telegram on January 25, 1912, the commission abruptly severed all relations between them.

Released at last (they thought) from the administrative confusions of the past months, Wilder and White moved quickly to reassert their position in the project with their own revised 1912 site plan along the essential lines of those established in 1911 but with extensions northward whose debt to the Olmsteds is clearly more than incidental. On September 10, 1912, the commission unanimously accepted the plan and authorized the architects to proceed immediately with construction plans and specifications for the first building of the group plan to be built, the Temple of Justice.

Uncertainty over the group plan was an issue that refused to go away. Then, as now, the governor was also chairman of the commission, and in 1913 Governor Hay, a Republican, was succeeded by Democrat Ernest Lister (in an otherwise Republican-dominated officialdom). Seeing himself as an economy-minded and businesslike executive, it was inevitable that the new chairman's attention would soon be drawn to such a conspicuous project as the state capitol. He proved to be unenthusiastic about the plan, disliked the north-south orientation, and in both the 1913 and 1915 sessions of the legislature opposed financial arrangements to continue with construction and in other ways impeded the project's progress. Thus in the 1915 session there appeared in the senate a bill with the following section, which would seem to set the stage for even further plan manipulation:

The state capitol commission shall have the power to amend or modify any of the plans and specifications heretofore authorized or adopted, or to adopt new plans and specifications for the location, construction and completion of buildings on the state capitol site.

Both the press and the architects of the state rose to defend the Wilder and White plan, opposing the bill with sufficient effectiveness to kill the section.

Nevertheless, Lister continued his opposition to the plan. In a letter to the chairman of the House Committee on State Capitol and Grounds he explained a new site plan that would shift the Legislative Building westward, reorienting it away from the north and eastward toward Main Street, the work of a Spokane architect (and a Democrat), Julius Zittel. The Flagg foundations would be reused for one of the subsidiary office buildings of the group and an entirely new location set for the Legislative Building.

Nothing came of the proposal that session, but in 1917 Lister again attacked the Wilder and White group plan, stating that the commission would need to examine further the matter of the proper location of each of the buildings. That year the legislature gave the commission that authority, and it moved quickly to exercise it, authorizing Zittel to prepare plans for the new office building on the Flagg foundations to be ready for occupancy on January 1, 1919.

There was a general hue and cry against this most serious challenge to the original group plan. By resolution of January 16, 1917, the Washington State Chapter of the American Institute of Architects attacked the
Zittel plan for its "utilitarian and inartistic" narrowness and reaffirmed its "belief that the only way the State can hope to have worthy and coherent work on the Capitol Grounds and Buildings accomplished is to carry out the plans so excellently prepared, and already adopted and paid for by the State." The chapter urged all citizens to let state officials know of their concern over this potential loss, the press making sure to reveal Zittel's party affiliation in a state that was still predominantly Republican.

But what was probably the most decisive factor in the failure of Lister to achieve Zittel's group plan was not so much public and professional protest but the declaration of war by the United States against Germany in April 1917. Calling capitol construction "wanton waste" when the country was at war, the Seattle Star urged the governor to halt it. This the commission did, declaring a postponement until the return of more promising construction conditions. By the time those conditions had reappeared, both Zittel and his building had been forgotten.

Nevertheless, the issue remained. With the war over and the deceased Governor Lister replaced in 1919 by Republican Lieutenant Governor Louis F. Hart, the commission decided that the controversy over the group plan must be permanently settled. To that end they turned to R. H. Thomson, Seattle's city engineer since 1892 and a well-known and enormously respected civil servant. He was asked to consider the background and circumstances of the group plan and to give his recommendations to the commission on its future.

Thomson's nine-page letter to the commission of May 31, 1919, reported at length on "his most trying labor" following an initial site inspection, ruminated in general about the site's condition and what he found there already in place, and reviewed the intentions of both the Wilder and White and Zittel plans. While the commission was pressing Thomson to move as expeditiously as possible to assist them in carrying out their mandate, he protested to the governor at one point on the inadequacies of the basic site information he was being provided and the slowness of getting it, commenting, "I shall rush the work as fast as can be, but I cannot make bricks without straw." But by August 1919 he could report to the commission and provide it with yet another group plan.

In it, the Flagg foundations were entirely abandoned, Thomson making much of the triangular arrangement of the three principal buildings that would give precedence to the capitol and its visibility. At its August 30th meeting the commission politely accepted his plan, authorized payment for his services, and then proceeded at its September 10th meeting to reconfirm its commitment to the Wilder and White group plan by unanimously passing a supportive resolution: "That the Commission is determined to erect a capitol building using the present [or Flagg] foundations and Messers. Wilder and White are directed to immediately prepare plans and specifications."

Thus concluded the enduring presence of proposed site plan revisions for the capitol group in the records of the commission. Thereafter, the subject of site would be reduced to landscaping of the grounds whose basic orientation and juxtapositions had finally been permanently set.

As for the landscaping, given the history of the Olmsted Brothers' experience with the project, it is rather unexpected to find them in a further association with it. Yet, even more unexpectedly, their involvement proved to be a vehicle by which the architects themselves raised once again a group plan specter, the location of the Temple of Justice, a return initiated by Wilder and White in their letter of July 7, 1927, to the Olmsteds welcoming them back to the project:

It may be as well at this time to outline our conception of the Group; so you may understand the purposes of certain features. As you know, this Group is made up of a series of small units...which in the more usual conditions are combined to make a single unit of sufficient magnitude to have great dignity on that score alone. Our early studies in the original competition in 1911, convinced us that only by so arranging the
subordinate buildings as to screen the substructure of the Legislative Building, could a broad enough base be provided for a dome of proper size, and this not only accounts for the location of the Temple of Justice directly in front of the Legislative Building, but also prevents the full value of the Group being obtained until the three additional subordinate buildings are erected to the south and west of the Legislative Building.

Here there has been introduced a new note in the partners' rationalization for locating the Temple of Justice as they did and when they did it. It is indeed true that they gave major consideration in 1911 to the relationship of the dome to the group as a whole, though this was never mentioned in extant records as a consideration during the drawn-out confrontations of 1911-12. But employing that sensitivity as explanation in 1927 for the site planning of 1911 seems more than a little after-the-fact.

The Olmsteds resurrected their earlier displeasure with the group plan's northward axial staircase between the campus site and the city beyond. Their 1912 plan had reflected this displeasure with its abandonment of that axis in favor of one slicing diagonally across the city's grid to connect with Olympia's downtown park and adjoining old state capitol. Since then the state had acquired additional property eastward from the original Water Street alignment to Main Street (renamed Capitol Way) to form a much larger campus for which to plan. Although in the architects' July letter to the Olmsteds they too had abandoned the northerly staircase, their alternative was a west-east approach on 13th Street, a reflection of their revised plan of 1912. The Olmsteds, however, saw otherwise, suggesting modified diagonal approaches from Capitol Way, the northerly one on axis with the Legislative Building's dome. Though the architects expressed some uneasiness about this, in due course and after the Olmsteds' persistent support for their alternative landscape plan of 1928, which included double diagonals, Wilder and White gave their blessing, calling it, in their somewhat subdued judgment, "a very satisfactory solution."

The Olmsted plan was substantially in place by 1930. What one finds on the campus today is essentially what Wilder and White in 1911 and the Olmsteds in 1928 had established for it, with the exception that the Governor's Mansion remains in its original location and the western flanking administration building was never built. This comprises the group's west campus, the present-day campus east of Capitol Way being entirely a post-World War II development.

Reviewing the history of the plan for Washington's state capitol group reveals the roles Wilder and White, the Olmsted Brothers and others played over the years in its shaping, the several decisions affecting the relationships of the group to its site and within the plan itself, and various grounds cited for understanding what one finds there today. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the visual and circulation approaches to the capitol group remain awkward and the Temple of Justice does violence to the perceptual potentials of its principal architectural element, the Legislative Building and its dome. As we have seen, however, there were several circumstances that tended to dictate how and why the Wilder and White group plan was established and has since persisted:

- The programmatic requirement to reuse the Flagg foundations with their relative closeness to the site's 15th Street property line, thereby denying the architects the spatial generosity there for a building of major importance in the group.

Conditions dictated by legal constraints on the commission and its disinclination to make further land acquisitions below the site's southern property line, reinforced by that area's existing development quality, ownership clout, and the commission's political timidity.

The competition program and the site's potential that required the Legislative Building's design axis to be northward, though incorporating an area with forbidding topographical challenges.
The architects' preoccupation with the Legislative Building and a pleasing proportional relationship between its dome and the ensemble of buildings it was intended to crown.

The prestige of the Temple of Justice as the second most important building of the group that required a locational identity and treatment commensurate with that status.

Given these considerations, one can perhaps reluctantly conclude that Wilder and White and the commission made a sensible design decision in remaining loyal to the essence of the 1911 group plan. But good sense does not necessarily satisfy the heart. Nowhere, looking from the steps of the Legislative Building, can one see the distant panorama of nature as the competition program had anticipated. And from the shores of Capitol Lake looking south toward the group's acropolis, the dome is in full view but the rest of the Legislative Building's grand principal entrance facade is tucked in behind the subdued design of the Temple of Justice's backside.

The plan's fatal flaw lies in a single competition program demand which, had the architects aggressively initiated efforts to eliminate it, might have resolved the dilemma before it was allowed to develop: the requirement that the Flagg foundations be reused. Had the architects in 1912 insisted that the location of those walls was an unreasonable distortion of the site's design potential, they could then have developed their group plan with the versatility the program had been denying them. The splendid design axis, framed on either side by group subsidiary buildings, could have swept dramatically and uninterruptedly northward toward Puget Sound and the distant Olympics. Seen from the north, the Legislative Building's great dome and north portico would have been monumental partners powerfully closing that vista. And the Temple of Justice could have realized a dignified and supportive role in its relationship to the Legislative Building and to the residential area to the south.

The irony of all this is that in due course Wilder and White did successfully insist (but much later) on the abandonment of the Flagg foundations, but for Legislative Building design rather than site design reasons, and that the ensemble of forms and spaces shown in the "what might have been" plan has in large part actually been realized but in the wrong direction, seen only if you view the group from the south and before the State Library was built.

And so, speculation regarding the circumstances that brought about today's Washington State Capitol Campus notwithstanding, and appreciating the environmental design achievement that the campus so clearly is, one could still wish for a happier union of the works of nature and the designer, a less ambiguous triumph of architecture, landscape architecture and site design. The student of architectural history is left with a lingering twinge of regret for what might have been. But such are the perils of peripatetic planning.

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