



CAPITOL CHALLENGE

The Olmsted Brothers' Landscape Architecture Master Plan for the Washington State Capitol Group in Olympia

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The Olmsted Brothers, an internationally renowned firm of landscape architects based in Massachusetts, created and implemented Washington State's Capitol Campus landscape design. A review of their efforts provides an intriguing glimpse into state politics and the complications of long-distance project management. The state's internal political frays, coupled with the ongoing influence of Capitol Campus architects Walter Robb Wilder and Harry Keith White, strongly influenced the ultimate shape of the plan and the degree of its actual implementation.

The story begins with a March 1911 meeting of the Capitol Commission (later called the Capitol Committee) where architect Charles Saunders, at the request of Governor Marion E. Hay (1909-1913), urged the commission to employ the services of a landscape architect to create a master plan for what was then 20 acres of capitol grounds in Olympia. The state had just resolved to develop a national competition to solicit concepts for the capitol group of buildings that would house the executive, legislative, and judicial functions. Plans for the Temple of Justice were to be developed first. Saunders thought the campus program could be simplified for the competition if the approaches and overall organization were identified.

On April 13, 1911, John Charles Olmsted, at Saunders's urgent summons and without any contract in place, made the firm's first visit to the Capitol Campus for a meeting with the governor and the Capitol Commission, and a chance to tour the grounds.

Olmsted and Walter White discussed current property boundaries, which included the steep bluff to the north, at the foot of which stood the Northern Pacific Railroad roundhouse, yard, and tracks. Existing structures on the capitol grounds included the wood-framed Territorial Capitol Building and the Governor's Mansion, built for the 1909 Alaska–Yukon–Pacific Exposition. Olmsted was surprised to learn that the state had just sold the land along the harbor (what is now Capitol Lake) as the back sides of industrial buildings did not make for a pleasing vista. He thought the overall site to be well-suited to the commission's plans but strongly encouraged the state to acquire additional land, particularly to the south, to provide street frontage along the campus edges.

Olmsted suggested that a more naturalistic treatment of the steep north bluff—rather than the massive stairway proposed in architect Ernest Flagg's unused 1893 plan—could afford the desired aesthetics at a reasonable cost. A planting of low, well-pruned trees along the edge of the bluff could screen the industrial buildings along the harbor below while allowing a view of Budd Inlet and the mountain vista far to the northwest. Throughout the project, Olmsted

stressed the importance of establishing a connection between the capitol grounds and downtown Olympia. He recommended a diagonal avenue (running southwest to northeast) along the edge of the bluff down to Sylvester Park and the Old Capitol Building (originally the Thurston County Courthouse). This avenue would provide an impressive, practical approach for the daily traffic between city and campus.

Following Olmsted's visit, the Capitol Commission hired architect Charles H. Bebb to develop the competition program, which was approved by the commission on April 29, 1911. This program loosely folded the landscape into the overall concept, eliminating the need to hire a landscape architect. Bebb's program also set the basic premise that a north–south axis should be the defining alignment of the group, a concept that would bring lasting complications. The state issued the competition guidelines in May 1911 and selected Wilder and White's design as the winning proposal on August 3, 1911.

That same day, Governor Hay sent a telegram to the Olmsted Brothers to inquire whether they could, on short notice, advise the state on preparing a landscape plan for the Capitol Campus. The commission was eager to show progress to the public, despite a delay in preparing the architectural plans that resulted when one of the partners—Walter Wilder—fell ill. Consequently, the commission returned to the Olmsted Brothers.

James Frederick Dawson, a member of the Olmsted Brothers firm, met with the commission the following December. They discussed hiring the firm to provide a preliminary plan showing the location of the Temple of Justice in relation to the Legislative Building, the other three proposed office buildings, and the Governor's Mansion. These plans would include the general layout of walkways, roads, and approaches. By the meeting's end, the Capitol Commission resolved unanimously to hire the Olmsted Brothers for a two-year period.

Because the commission reopened this debate about the location of the Temple of Justice, Wilder and White and the Olmsted Brothers had an opportunity to adjust the plans. Over the next several weeks they traded communications on their perspectives for the capitol group and associated organization.

January 1912 proved a tumultuous month for the capitol grounds landscape design. On January 4, Wilder and White revised their views on the placement of the Temple of Justice. The architects decided that the southern location they had previously discussed with the Olmsted Brothers in December cramped the overall composition, particularly the courtyard enclosed by these buildings. The architects also argued that locating the Temple of Justice north of the Legislative Building allowed the two most important buildings—in their opinion—to be visible, even though the discernible portions of both the Temple of Justice and the Legislative Building were their back façades.

On January 11, the Olmsted Brothers transmitted two sketches showing alternate arrangements for, and approaches to, the capitol buildings. The Olmsted Brothers wanted comments from the architects prior to submitting plans to the Capitol Commission before January 25, on which date the governor expected visitors and wanted to display the plans. If the architects favored one of the plans, they would send only that plan. Both plans were a substantial departure from the content John Charles Olmsted and Walter Wilder had discussed in December.

The same day that the Olmsted Brothers mailed the above plans to Wilder and White, they were sent a harsh letter from Capitol Commission Secretary E. W. Ross. This letter reprimanded the

Olmsted Brothers, severed the verbal contract with them, and informed them that the commission had decided to locate the Temple of Justice north of the future Legislative Building site.

Due to the slowness of mail transit from the West to the Atlantic Coast, the Olmsted Brothers did not receive this letter until January 20, 1912. In the meantime, they kept working on the campus plan and building locations. Prior to January 20, Wilder and White advised the Olmsted Brothers of the commission's decision to site the Temple of Justice north of the Legislative Building; however, they made no mention of the contract termination. The Olmsted Brothers assured Wilder and White in a January 12 letter that they would do everything in their power to achieve a successful result if the commission ultimately desired to locate the Temple of Justice north of the Legislative Building.

On January 17, the Olmsted Brothers mailed two perspective sketches to the Capitol Commission, illustrating views with the Temple of Justice north and south of the future Legislative Building site. The imagined vantage for these views was from the intersection of Water and Union Streets, north of the capitol grounds. The Olmsted Brothers believed this would most likely be the view for the majority of the public, as they would be driving south toward the capitol group from downtown Olympia. They urged consideration of the public's day-to-day traverse as an important design factor and felt that the Temple of Justice, when placed north of the Legislative Building, greatly diminished the latter, which they considered the dominant feature. Placement of the Temple of Justice south of the Legislative Building also afforded the opportunity to create a main boulevard from Sylvester Park up to the Capitol Group on the diagonal alignment noted earlier.

When the Olmsted Brothers received the letter from E. W. Ross severing their contract, they immediately informed Charles Saunders (who had first approached them as Governor Hay's emissary) of this development. They then sent a response to Ross urging that a decision wait until either John Charles Olmsted or James Frederick Dawson could come to Olympia and meet with the commissioners to discuss their concerns. Meanwhile, Saunders worked his contacts behind the scenes to find out what had motivated Ross's letter.

Saunders discovered that part of the commission's displeasure stemmed from John Charles Olmsted's back-dating of the contract to April 1911—when he made his first site visit—rather than from the date of the commission's resolution in November 1911. The commission also expressed concern that the Olmsted Brothers emphasized too strongly the surrounding areas when the commission's only concerns were the campus property presently owned by the state and the need to plan the buildings on those grounds.

Dawson suspected this might be a cover for the commission members' deeper disagreement with the Olmsted Brothers' proposed location of the Temple of Justice south of the Legislative Building. During Dawson's visits with Governor Hay, the governor had expressed interest in considering the best possible plan for the entire area and identifying what other steps should be taken to achieve this long-term goal. With no further resolution, the Olmsted Brothers ceased work on the capitol grounds by the end of January.

On February 3, 1927, almost exactly 15 years after the termination of the Olmsted Brothers' involvement with the capitol grounds, Charles Saunders, now a state representative, wrote Dawson to inform him that the Legislative Building (the last of the initial three built) was nearing

completion. He noted that conversations had commenced about how to deal with the campus landscape and approaches. Saunders also let Dawson know that Wilder and White, having reached the end of their contract, no longer stood in close favor with the commission, and that the commission itself was split between the two commission members (C. W. Clausen and Clark V. Savidge) and Governor Roland Hartley—the commission having been reduced from seven members to three (including the governor) in 1927.

Throughout this second and last phase of the Olmsted Brothers' work for the State of Washington, the continual decline of the political situation within the Capitol Commission exerted a profound shadow over the design work and the end product. Ultimately, behaviors regressed to verbal lashings from Governor Hartley, attacking the two other commissioners and Dawson directly.

On April 20, 1927, Dawson traveled to Olympia to walk the grounds and meet with the commission members. At this meeting, Dawson proposed to complete the plans in three stages, starting with a preliminary general plan for the overall layout of approaches, driveways, plazas, sidewalks, and relocation of the Governor's Mansion, followed by a grading and then a planting plan. While walking around the site, Dawson had already picked out some notable large specimens of hollies, Lawson cypress, and Irish yew that could be protected and relocated for use within the landscape at minimal cost to the state.

The Olmsted Brothers wrote Wilder and White to let the architects know they had received the contract to do the landscaping and to request drawings of the buildings for use in preparing their planting and grading plans. Wilder and White took this opening to reiterate their 1911 vision of the capitol group as a series of small units combined to make the whole. The architects asserted that the only logical approach to the complex was from 13th Street off Capitol Way. They further suggested that the land between the new Insurance Building and Capitol Way be planted heavily and divided formally on a grid system, organized by the streets to the east, in order to eliminate any large open spaces that might detract from the effect of space immediately bordering the capitol group. This letter marked the first of a series of insertions into the process by the architects that ultimately complicated and, in concert with the existing political tensions of the Capitol Commission, effectively undermined the process of preparing and adopting the Olmsted Brothers' plan.

In August 1927, the Olmsted Brothers submitted plans for the capitol grounds to the commission for review and approval in order to move on to the grading plans. By the end of August, Commissioner Clausen, with influence from Wilder and White, was still holding up the plan review and approval of the Olmsted Brothers' concept. Despite this delay, the Olmsted Brothers kept working ahead on the drawings in order to keep up with a schedule that would see grading in the spring. They explored various options for grading and plazas and considered relocating the Governor's Mansion east to place it parallel with the capitol group.

The Olmsted Brothers also solicited a list of available planting materials from J. J. Bonnell, a Seattle nurseryman held in high regard and with whom they had worked on numerous occasions in Seattle. As the commission continued to hold onto the drawings without issuing an approval or specific recommendations for changes, Saunders urged Dawson to return to Olympia to resolve the issue in person. To Saunders's initial dismay, Dawson sent one of the firm's chief designers, Hammond Sadler, to meet with the commission in October. Sadler quickly proved his diplomatic abilities and relieved all of Saunders's concerns. This commission meeting proved

particularly prickly. Wilder planned on attending to present his own report. The commission had not asked him to do so, but he felt obligated to present his and White's vision for the campus.

At the meeting, Wilder and Sadler each presented their concepts for the capitol grounds. Wilder's proposal brought forth his previously described vision for dense planting near the buildings and access to Capitol Way via 13th Street. In his October 13, 1927, report back to Dawson, Sadler characterized the planting scheme as a "hot day effect in summer and a cold and bleak day in winter." Although the commission purported to prefer the Olmsted plan, internal politics kept them silent.

Ultimately, the commission determined to have Wilder meet with Dawson in New York to work out a compromise. The governor wrote Dawson directly on October 14, 1927, expressing his admiration of the Olmsted Brothers' plan. He recognized the advantage the diagonals would provide in allowing a view of the capitol from the city and noted that the street arrangement facilitated delivery truck access to the rear of buildings, both built and proposed. He liked the reduction of square corners at street intersections, which he thought would help to keep traffic flowing and reduce congestion. He agreed that Wilder's scheme for the land east of the Insurance Building would eliminate any potential for large public gatherings. He also supported the informal semi-open park setting with scattered groups of trees, which would provide an important buffer between the noise and traffic along Capitol Way and the offices in the capitol buildings.

On November 23, 1927, after meeting with Wilder in New York, the Olmsted Brothers submitted their revised drawings for the capitol grounds. The overall scheme remained the same with the following changes: 1) the north diagonal moved slightly south to align with the cross axis of the Insurance Building while still remaining aligned with the dome; 2) the plaza dimensions reduced in front of the Insurance Building; 3) embellishments added to the road intersections north of the Insurance Building and south of the Temple of Justice; 4) the overlook terrace north of the Temple of Justice enlarged; 5) the widths of the diagonals set at 30 feet, with the width of the road between the plazas in front of the Insurance and Legislative buildings and the Temple of Justice set at 40 feet.

By 1928, the Olmsted Brothers, with an approved general plan now in place, moved ahead with developing the details for the layout and grading of the site while continuing to urge the state to purchase the land parcels between 14th and 15th streets and Capitol Way. During this period, Dawson corresponded with sculptor Alonzo Lewis, preparing the site for his *Winged Victory* monument north of the Insurance Building. The Olmsted Brothers drew upon their prior work in Washington, D.C., for the light standard style, with the change of a lantern luminaire instead of a globe. In March, the firm sent the Capitol Commission proposed locations for lighting along Capitol Way, commenting that their placement, in conjunction with the trees, reflected the intent to minimize the apparent number of vertical lines along the road. By May the Olmsted Brothers sent the completed grading plans, specifications, and estimates to the commission for review. The Olmsted Brothers cited the Utah capitol practices as a method for managing parking, where they simply did not allow parking in front of the buildings.

As summer turned to fall, the Capitol Commission still had not hired a chief engineer to supervise the landscaping work. Governor Hartley launched into an abusive attack on the commission members, demanding that the state's highway engineers do the work. The commissioners harbored serious reservations about this, as the state engineers would be more

expensive and were not experienced in the horticultural aspects of landscape design implementation.

Ultimately, highway engineer H. G. Porak was appointed to the position, with Fred C. Dunham, also a highway department engineer, providing in-field support. By January 1929, the Olmsted Brothers completed revisions to the grading plan. These revisions showed the existing trees to be saved and relocated within the grounds, adjustments per Porak's suggestions to the northeast entrance, and a new location for the former Territorial Capitol building on axis with the garden at the northeast entrance.

The Olmsted Brothers recommended hiring J. J. Bonnell as a consultant to provide Dunham with plant and soil knowledge. On May 15, 1929, the commission approved the grading and landscaping plans and began advertising for bids. On June 10, 1929, the state opened bids for the Capitol Campus landscape work. General contractor C. L. Creelman of Seattle won with the low bid of \$199,130.10. While work on the grounds commenced, the Olmsted Brothers continued to work on planning entrance gates to the campus that tied in with the concepts and materials of the sunken gardens and concrete walls. The Olmsted Brothers also submitted a preliminary plan for the sunken garden east of the Temple of Justice.

The seemingly smooth process of implementing the developed plans took a rough turn two months later. The commission wrote Dawson asking that he immediately plan a trip out to meet with them and discuss landscape plan changes. Following Dawson's meeting with the commission, he commented in his July 23, 1929, report that the governor "nearly knocked his head off." He urgently directed staff to start looking at a series of radical changes demanded by Governor Hartley. These included lowering the grade in front of the Insurance Building by approximately four feet, straightening the grade from 11th Street to the base of the Legislative Building's stone terrace, and removing every tree possible so the ground at the base of the Temple of Justice and the Legislative Building would be clearly visible from Capitol Way.

Fortunately, in subsequent meetings, both Savidge and Clausen confronted the governor and refused to modify the existing plans. In October, Savidge wrote Dawson inquiring about the date of his next visit to Olympia; the commissioner informed him that the governor would have nothing to do with the landscaping (no voting on any motion concerning it nor any signing of vouchers), assuring Dawson that he would not be harassed.

Amidst the turmoil, Alonzo Lewis inquired of Dawson if the circle that would contain the *Winged Victory* sculpture might be moved to the west and placed in the middle of the intersection of Cherry Lane Southwest and the east-west roadway running between the Temple of Justice and the Legislative Building. Dawson responded with a lengthy description of the reasoning for the existing location; he added that such a change "would be suicidal to the entire design of the plan." Lewis politely dropped the matter.

On January 10, 1930, J. J. Bonnell wrote Dawson to report on the status of the capitol grounds landscaping. The general contractor, Creelman, had proved a problem. Bonnell cited the inefficiency of their operation, such as refusing to purchase additional forms for concrete work. This meant that they had to wait for each section to set up before moving to the next, delaying the landscape work. Creelman's contract stated they were to have been finished by January 1, 1930, yet none of the parking strips were done and no pits had been dug for relocating trees or planting new ones. The contractor had completed most of the road paving, except for the porte

cochère and part of the plaza between the Temple of Justice and the Legislative Building; provided rough grading; and placed topsoil for the lawn and shrubbery areas. Dunham and Bonnell, in their landscaping discussions, opted to leave the slopes rough behind the Legislative Building and Temple of Justice in order to direct funds and work to the prominent areas between 11th and 14th streets and Capitol Way. By June 1930, the planting still had not been completed. The state was well into feeling the effects of the Great Depression, making landscaping a difficult priority.

In August 1930, Olmsted Brothers designer George Gibbs traveled to Olympia to conduct a site visit for the firm and bring their contract to a close. At the time, the Capital Commission had asked the state attorney general to intervene to reach a settlement for \$6,250 in claims against C. L. Creelman for delayed work on the campus landscaping. In October, the Olmsted Brothers submitted their final invoice to the commission.

From 1931 to 1934, Saunders lobbied for the Olmsted Brothers' involvement and the completion of their plans. This period marked the last phases in design implementation, with decreased involvement on the part of the Olmsted Brothers and repeated attempts by Governor Hartley to sabotage elements of the plan.

In May 1931, Hartley attempted to have the existing sidewalks and roads torn out, replacing them with new, straight sidewalks and roads. Savidge and Clausen voted against this proposal and resolved to carry through with the lighting and sprinkler plans. In June, the Capitol Commission awarded Martin Hardware Company of Olympia the lighting system contract for \$14,560. Viking Automatic Sprinkler Company of Seattle won the sprinkler system contract for \$11,440. As this work commenced, Governor Hartley again intervened, trying, unsuccessfully, to have the *Winged Victory* monument moved to a new location. Despite his efforts, those three substantial elements of the Olmsted Brothers' landscape design remained intact, and their work on the Capitol Campus was completed 20 years after it began.

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