



School of Architecture and Urban Planning

Department of Architecture
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The City of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission
Zeidler Municipal Building
841 N. Broadway, Room B-1
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Dear Members of the Historic Preservation Commission:

I write in strong support of the application to designate Washington Park in Milwaukee as a site of historic heritage.

I am an architect and vernacular architecture historian who has spent more than 28 years teaching, examining, and writing about urban cultural landscapes in North America. I am an Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with an honorary appointment with the Department of Art History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 2008, I co-founded the multi-campus Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures area of doctoral research, focused on study and analysis of Wisconsin's cultural landscapes. I have served on the board of the Vernacular Architecture Forum, a national organization dedicated to the study, preservation and analysis of the everyday world, and on the board of the Society of Architectural Historians, a nonprofit membership organization serving a network of local, national, and international institutions and individuals who, by profession or interest, focus on the history of the built environment and its role in shaping contemporary life.

In 2012, I began directing a historic preservation, public history and cultural landscapes field school in Milwaukee's neighborhoods. My knowledge of Washington Park's history and heritage emerges from a prolonged field experience in this neighborhood

since 2014. The field school received multiple awards from the Wisconsin Humanities Council and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). This project was nominated by the National Alliance for the Humanities as one of the top national digital and engaged humanities projects.

My support for this application to include Washington Park as a designated site of historic heritage is based on four major arguments. **1) Authorship — this is a unique example of an urban public green space designed by our nation’s foremost landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, 2) Social Significance — this park is an important historical site in Milwaukee’s growth as an industrial city, 3) Contemporary Significance — Washington Park marks an urban edge between diverse yet segregated populations, and 4) Ecological Significance — this site brings together social, human, natural, and biological systems and should be understood comprehensively.**

I urge you to evaluate Washington Park’s significance for its architectural material value as well as the myriad intangible practices, representations, expressions, and knowledge that make it a unique part of Milwaukee’s human history. I have carefully examined the park’s tangible aspects — the trees, layout, water bodies and grassy knolls that define the park’s physical character. I have also considered its more intangible heritage, such as memories, historical events, sensorial atmospheres, and experiential boundaries that describe the park’s social significance to generations of Milwaukeeans.

Authorship

Washington Park was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in the last decade of the 19th Century. This itself should be reason enough for us to preserve this park. Few American cities are fortunate enough to have a system of parks designed by the “father of landscape architecture.” This park embodied the principles of Olmstedian landscape design and is therefore an invaluable example of designed space that should be respected and maintained.

But, of course, Washington Park has more significance than its illustrious designer! It was part of a network of seven new parks dotting the urban landscape around Milwaukee, which were all selected under Olmsted’s guidance. Unlike Lake Park and Riverside Park, Washington Park, then called West Park, marked the less urban and more picturesque western boundary of a new city on a Great Lake. Consider Olmsted locating this park on Lisbon Plank Road, the extant thoroughfare that connected Milwaukee to the city of Lisbon, as if laying a stake on the western end of an emerging metropolis.

The design of West Park, also connected aesthetically to the landscape of a nearby summer home. Both reflect an important moment in American garden design. Built around 1853, Villa Uhrig was the largest building close to this new park. An early example of an Italianate Style villa in Milwaukee, Villa Uhrig was the suburban summer home of Franz Joseph Uhrig. This area became part of Milwaukee only in the 1890s and West Park, when it was built, marked the western edge of the city.

The villa's garden was influenced by another famous American landscape designer, Andrew Jackson Downing. Before Downing's untimely death, he and Olmsted were acquainted and had brought architect Calvert Vaux to America as his collaborator. (Vaux later became Olmsted's partner in designing Central Park). Instead of a formal and geometric style of landscape design, Downing espoused a modern "naturalistic" style.

Washington Park also reflects that nascent decision to mark an emerging modern and industrial city. Preserving this park will commemorate that historic moment. In fact, treating this park as made of parts — isolatable ecosystems, dividable sections, separate ecologies, — and hence ignoring Olmsted intended unified design -- would be an egregious mistake.

Social Significance

Designating Washington Park as a historic district is not a plea to preserve a singular moment in perpetual amber. This resilient park has accommodated "change over time," which also contributes to its exceptional heritage value.

By the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century rationalist period, reformers sought to make usable park spaces for active leisure and exercise. Washington Park too became a site of this reformist zeal. By 1907, it had become home to the nation's sixth largest zoo. Connected by a streetcar system, the new zoo attracted working-class immigrants from the city. During the first decade of the 20th century, Polish and German families came to Washington Park every weekend. These memories remain etched in family histories of Milwaukee residents. as our research has shown. The slowly growing city expanded to its suburban fringes and the area around Washington Park urbanized.

The transformation of the park into a recreational space coincides with historian Galen Cranz's account of America's parks. According to Cranz, the mid-nineteenth-century of park designs defined a romantic period "during which park designers sought to create naturalistic rural oases within cities as refuges for enervated urban men." Villa Uhrig eventually became part of a more crowded urban grid and its garden got divided and

sold as city parcels. The only large green open space that remained in this area was Washington Park.

A 19th-century concert pavilion was eventually replaced in 1938 by an Art Deco bandshell, which became home to the city's extremely popular "Music Under the Stars" series, featuring nationally renowned performers. The zoo eventually moved to a new location and its site became home to a senior center. Popular free concerts have resumed during the past decade, again drawing visitors from around the park and beyond. Other active recreation is also accommodated in Washington Park.

Nonetheless, the park remains popular for what Olmsted described as "passive recreation"--public green space used for picnics, walking, running and other self-directed leisurely activities. The park's flexible "pastoral" design accommodates a wide range of such activities and social gatherings. Designating this park as a historic district will respect that rich heritage and protect open-ended uses.

Contemporary Significance and Potential

By 1958, the zoo's relocation from its Washington Park location to a 200-acre wooded parkland further west was a symptom of a complex history of an automobile culture, the continuing impact of 1930s redlining laws, racial segregation, and an increasingly racially-divided city.

Washington Park currently marks a boundary between two worlds — poor and well off, black and white, mostly tenants and majority homeowners. Neighborhoods on the east side include Washington Park, Martin Drive East, and Walnut Hill. They are impoverished and disinvested areas whose residents' brave and civic-minded struggles keep these locations vibrant. West of the park is Washington Heights, which attracts racially mixed residents, including many who are more affluent than those east of the park. In a 2018 research paper, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Urban Studies student Goncalo Borges wrote, "The contemporary Washington Park and its surrounding neighborhoods are today a complex reality, where boundaries, segregation, resistance, culture and landscapes dance in a stage that is much bigger than the local band shell. Washington Park is complex, and represents one of the most complex and sensitive cases of Milwaukee, and American cities..."

As Sen and Schmitz (2015) showed us with their past field work at Washington Park, cultural landscapes are a phenomenon materialized in space. Cultural landscapes are the materialization of a complex relationship between individuals and their larger cultural and material contexts."

According to the authors, such landscapes are not necessarily physical, tangible and visible – often may be symbolic, experiential and sensorial invisible to our eyes.”

Using the Racial Dot Map generated from census data and land value maps generated from Zillow.com, Borges shows how contemporary Washington Park defines the boundary between two worlds – black and white. But according to Borges although “Washington Park’s narrative shows the emergence of difference, division, and segregation,” that edge remains porous. Hence Washington Park also offers a possibility of engagement and resistance – a thick edge that has the potential to bring together the segregated neighborhoods on its two sides. (see, <https://mkeelab.weebly.com/washingtoen-park-green-boundaries-and-social-action.html>)

In order to understand the unifying power of Washington Park as an edge, we need to see the entire park holistically – as one united ecosystem that bridges a divided world.

A Holistic Approach to Preservation and Ecology

Recent scholarship in environmental history, historical preservation, and Anthropocene ecology shows us that seeing biology, botany, and social space as separate is a fallacy that can have negative repercussions. (See works of William Cronon, Bruno Latour and Mick Lennon, “Nature conservation in the Anthropocene: Preservation, restoration and the challenge of novel ecosystems,” *Planning Theory & Practice*, 16:2 (2015): 285-290). That means that seeing this significant historic urban park as separate ecologies consisting of plants, animals, and biotic elements – distinct and separate from the human histories and ethnos--would be inappropriate. Similarly, separating out the built objects from the natural elements, the buildings from landscapes, and the tangible from the intangible would do a civic disservice and devalue the park.

Given the segregated reality of neighborhoods surrounding Washington Park, focusing only on biology renders invisible its fraught human history. Separating the leisure spaces from recreational and “natural” spaces simply reinforces an atmosphere of urban segregation. It also creates a compartmentalized view that ignores the rich labor and community history that frames this incredible urban jewel, instead focusing only on a biological narrative.

Revitalizing Washington Park demands holistic restoration that collaboratively considers and balances natural resources and systems, historic design and human uses.

These are the reasons I support designating all of Washington Park as a historical and heritage landscape district. I am convinced that such a designation will do justice to the heritage and legacies of one of Milwaukee's urban jewels and render this incomparable history visible to the entire world.

If you have any further questions, please contact me at senA@uwm.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Arijit Sen". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that extends across the width of the signature.

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