



February 8, 2017

## Design Perspectives: Would a ‘pause’ hurt SAAM’s expansion project?

By [CLAIR ENLOW](#)  
Special to the Journal

Nothing fires up preservation passions like a threat to the tranquility of a park.

A planned addition to the Seattle Asian Art Museum in Volunteer Park has brought out plenty of Olmsted park advocates — from the neighbors on Capitol Hill to Washington D.C. — who oppose giving any parkland over to SAAM.

**Design Perspectives**  
By Clair Enlow

A long-planned museum addition would cover about 3,200 square feet behind the current museum building. It's an overdue investment in the future of an art institution that has no modern climate control. But park preservationists have recently joined hands with some nervous neighbors, and from the look of last month's letters and blogs, the stir may delay the project even more than it already has. That would be a setback for SAAM, the city and the region.

### Art in the park

The Olmsted Brothers, the legendary Boston firm that shaped many beloved parks from New York's Central Park to Seattle's Seward Park, laid out Volunteer Park between 1904 and 1909. It has the firm's signature pattern of naturalistic, meadow-like greens, as well as meandering trails and long views.

Like other Olmsted parks, this one also contains beloved architectural elements, including a conservatory and a water tower. There's some love for the museum also, but it seems parks enthusiasts just did not expect any changes.

There have already been plenty. SAAM used to be SAM, before Seattle Art Museum moved downtown to its present home on First Avenue. Opposite the historic facade of the old building — an architectural jewel designed by Carl F. Gould and completed in 1933 — is Isamu Noguchi's 1969 “Black Sun” sculpture and a historic reservoir.

Sloping away in the back of the building is one of those Olmsted greens, actually a slightly muddy hollow already shadowed by SAAM.

A three-level expansion designed by LMN Architects will add 12,500 square feet of space in an on-the-ground footprint of around 3,200.



Image by LMN Architects [\[enlarge\]](#)

**The SAAM expansion packs needed new space into a compact footprint behind the historic building.**

In addition to the updated climate control system in the old basement, the addition includes new space for education, exhibits and conservation. Construction of the \$49 million project awaits a nod from the city of Seattle, which owns the land.

In the meantime, a model in the museum basement shows a compact, modern addition. Most of it is completely opaque, as befits the program of a museum with a controlled environment inside. But drawings show a glass-walled circulation area on the second level, which promises to bring visitors into close visual contact with the park and its tree canopy.

Almost all of the addition is tucked behind SAAM, topping out at the same level as the roof of the older structure. It doesn't upstage the old, but neither does it confuse old and new.

The museum will be bulkier in back, but it will also reward visitors with new and intriguing views of the park, and give park visitors a glimpse into the workings of a modern museum.

## Growth and pushback

Now the project has the attention of board members at the National Association for Olmsted Parks, which issued a request in December that the expansion plans be reconsidered.

It's predictable that nationwide historic parks advocates do not want anything changing within the bounds of an Olmsted-designed park. But the museum building has always been a work in progress. Original plans show a footprint twice the size of the present one. It wasn't scaled down out of respect for the Olmsted plan, either, but for purely budgetary reasons.

There's much to be gained through the proposed addition, and little to be lost. On the back and two sides of the historic building, additions dating from the 1940s, 50s and 60s include chain link fencing and unartful concrete. No one is defending these, but some seem shocked that the altered structure might be altered yet again, even though the design greatly improves the views and preserves the trees.

The museum has been preparing for expansion for many years. First was the realization it would cost a bundle just to shoehorn adequate climate control equipment into the basement, with the loss of many usable rooms.

There's a lot to lose. In addition to art and artifacts from all over Asia, the museum has the Gardner Center for Asian Art & Ideas, which sponsors lectures and other programs; and two libraries, the Ann P. Wyckoff Teacher Resource Center, a free lending library, and the McCaw Foundation Library, a teaching research center. It's already a squeeze.

The museum and its design team have worked hard to fit a program for a growing mission into as small a footprint as possible.

"We've just been as modest as we can be and get in the basic program," said Sam Miller of LMN Architects.

"It's a great historic building in a great historic park," said SAAM director Kim Rorschach.

They both need care. And that's part of the issue. At least one neighbor who preferred to remain in the background said he has a problem with the fact that the museum can raise millions for its



Image by LMN Architects [\[enlarge\]](#)

**The expansion includes this area on the second level, where people inside can view the park and people outside can see inside the museum.**

expansion while the historic park needs substantial public investment in maintenance, and isn't getting enough. In fact there's money in the museum's expansion budget for helping the park, from monitoring the health of trees to restoring some historic trails.

Seattle is not unusual in having a cultural institution or public facility in a beloved park, where the only way to add space is to step out into parkland. This scenario has played out in various ways from coast to coast. Perhaps the granddaddy of all is the expansion of the Metropolitan Museum into New York's Central Park.

The Cultural Landscape Foundation's Charles Birnbaum is more worried than ever about the precedent that has been set by these kinds of projects, and the loss of irreplaceable parklands in urban areas. That's why, upon learning about the SAAM expansion plan, his group put Volunteer Park on its endangered list, with the rallying cry "Open Season on Open Space."

Reached by phone, Birnbaum agreed that the devil is in the details, and each city must contend with its own priorities. And at SAAM, a lot of details have been worked out.

So could this fight have been avoided? Maybe not. The obvious approach for an expanding institution is to design first, putting its best foot forward before showing the design to friends — and opponents. The alternative, design-by-committee with the opposition pulling against the team, makes no sense at all.

But this is SAAM and Volunteer Park. We're having a Seattle moment.

Although the museum said it has held 21 public meetings over the last decade and made numerous changes to the initial proposals based on community comments, Capitol Hill neighbors say the owner did not reach out or invite enough input on the design. They are accusing the institution of plotting the project in secret and then putting up signs right before construction, according to one neighbor, who says they just wanted to have their say earlier.

Last month the blogosphere lit up with the project, and there is some support for SAAM. But Seattle Parks director Jesus Aguirre issued a letter calling for a pause in planning so that the need to take a bite out of the park can be reassessed. Some neighbors greeted this as the end of the project, and cheered.

In today's superheated construction climate, delay could be cause for alarm. The museum is vacating the old building on schedule for starting construction this spring, but now the start date is in September. Costs continue to rise. Will they ever move back in?

Doug Bayley is cofounder of Volunteer Park Trust, which is dedicated to the park's restoration and protection. He's also a longtime



Photo by Clair Enlow [\[enlarge\]](#)

**This model shows an addition on the upper left closely fitted to the old building.**

Capitol Hill resident. He doesn't want the project killed, but he's worried that it could be.

“I think it would be a disaster,” he said. He remembers when the building was closed for remodeling in the 1990s after SAM moved downtown. “The park visibly went downhill,” said Bayley. “We're still recovering from that.”

A SAAM that can't be overhauled once every 80 years or so is a SAAM that may not survive, especially if it must steer a project that rises and sinks on public opinion. It's getting expensive, but not too late.



Photo by Benjamin Benschneider [\[enlarge\]](#)

**The historic views of SAAM, completed in 1933, will remain intact.**

The operative word for this phase of the project is “pause,” Bayley said, speaking for himself. The museum needs to answer Aguirre's questions and justify the public benefit of its expansion, he said.

It should not be too difficult. In fact, SAM has already issued a letter in response to Aguirre's questions, citing many of the points made here.

SAAM is a living institution, a regional and international attraction, not just another piece of the park.

---

**Clair Enlow can be reached by e-mail at [clair@clairenlow.com](mailto:clair@clairenlow.com).**

### **Previous columns:**

- [Design Perspectives: A walk in Santiago offers lessons for other cities](#), 01-11-2017
- [Design Perspectives: Affordable housing is getting bigger and better](#), 11-30-2016
- [Design Perspectives: ST3: Even at \\$54B, it's the only way to grow](#), 11-02-2016
- [Design Perspectives: A path of great resistance in Steinbrueck Park](#), 10-12-2016
- [Design Perspectives: Townhouses adding density to neighborhoods](#), 09-14-2016
- [Design Perspectives: The future looks bright for Seattle's waterfront](#), 08-10-2016
- [Design Perspectives: Occidental Park getting a great new neighbor](#), 07-27-2016
- [Design Perspectives: Can we put a lid over our urban freeways?](#), 06-29-2016