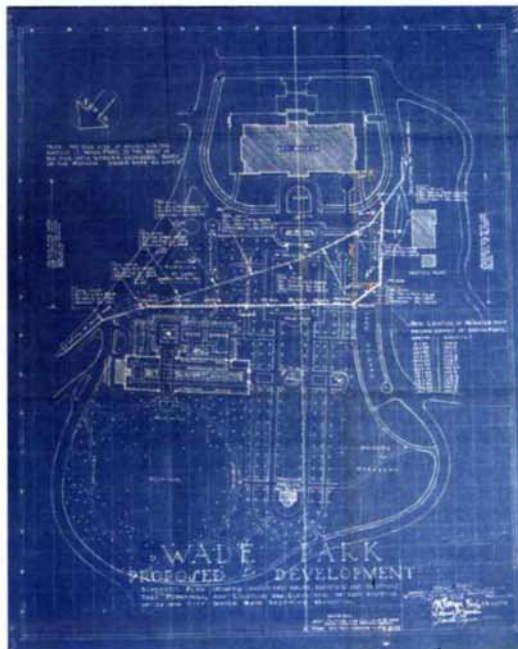


The Fine Arts Garden

The Olmsted Brothers designed the park ten years after the museum opened. Two designers discuss its evolution ever since.



Above and Above Right An Olmsted Brothers sketch for the stairs and balustrade at the Euclid Avenue end of the Fine Arts Garden, and an early site plan for Wade Park

Thomas Zarfoss is principal of Benkhe & Associates landscape architects. His firm designed the restoration of the Fine Arts Garden in 2000, the final portions of which are now being completed as the building project concludes. Jeffrey Strean, the museum's director of design and architecture, has helped shepherd the process throughout. This conversation took place in April 2013.

TZ To set the stage a little bit I thought I'd go back to the time when John D. Rockefeller and Jephtha Wade donated the land. The original thoughts about park planning were all sort of in the English tradition, very informal. Some of the first drawings I ever saw of the Rockefeller and Wade parks were certainly of that tradition. Then the idea of setting the Wade portion aside as a cultural Mecca is pretty great, when you look back on the history of it. Some of the things that happened since are really fascinating as well, how this all evolved with the Cleveland Museum of Art at the center of it. I tend to look at this thing as a whole: Wade Park, and not just the Fine Arts Garden or just the art museum. The Cleveland Garden Center [now the Botanical Garden] was here when the Olmsteds did their plan, then it moved over to Wade Oval and the Cleveland Museum of Natural History filled in an old riparian corridor. It's in that context that the Fine Arts Garden evolved, in the tradition of English park and garden design.

JS What's interesting is that I think most people looking at it would assume that this was all part of a master plan that was executed, when in fact it was much more of an evolving thing. There was a lot of pressure on the art museum to kind of tame Wade Park, which was not a pretty place. It had elements of what is now the Fine Arts Garden, but it was not great looking. In fact, the Garden Club's effort to raise money was in response to real disappointment in the community regarding the terrible shape of the land in front of the museum.

TZ This area was the suburbs, where people had their summer homes, quite literally. The original Olmsted plan was a reflection of the approach to design in a period when designers were seen as god-like. You wouldn't have seen any community meetings back then about what the park should look like. They laid it out and told people what it should look like, then went back to their office and designed things—a little bit different approach than one would take today if that were a blank slate and we were going to rethink it. A lot of this happened very incrementally. Like you said, it wasn't part of any grand plan, and it's kind of amazing that it turned out as well as it all has.

JS It was kind of a chicken-and-egg thing. As to the siting of the museum, they did put it in a good spot that allowed someone to come back at a later date and refine



the landscape that was there and turn it into a kind of a setpiece for the museum. It completed something that I think everyone expected would eventually be improved, but they just didn't have a plan at the time.

TZ And the Fine Arts Garden led to the museum's front door, although people used the back door.

JS Even back then everyone used the back door. Just like when people come to your house and you say go around back. You could park back there, people got dropped off there. That's where the turnstiles were.

TZ Whereas the front was always the formal ceremonial entrance.

JS The Olmsteds got that so right, the careful balance between the formal garden and the romantic natural landscape. They framed the Fine Arts Garden at either end of the lagoon with these formal elements, but in between was this kind of romantic notion of what a natural landscape would be—which is not a natural landscape! It's a really beautiful thing, and I think your firm managed to retain the feel of that. We were starting to get a lot of little flowerbeds and things that really didn't belong in an Olmsted garden, and I think we've kind of gotten it back to—not exactly plant-by-plant what was designed, but the spirit of it is absolutely there.

TZ There certainly have been some cultural changes, too, that required we relook at some things. One was security—health/safety/welfare issues—and there's no doubt that that's changed since 1927; and the other is the capacity to maintain a public structure like this. When I first came to Cleveland they were building the Hanna



Fountains on Mall B. As you know, they took those out a number of years ago, but when you look back, even then in 1960, the mall had an entire maintenance crew that included gardeners, electricians, and plumbers: amazing! And I'm sure that at the time the Fine Arts Garden was built in the '20s, there was a big crew stationed here.

JS Cleveland at that time had a good capacity to augment that crew. By the time I arrived in 1994 there was, I think, one city person. And now zero. And so the cities—not just here, but cities everywhere—just don't have the capacity to maintain these things the way they used to. If you think about it, when we started looking at this about 15 years ago, it was right at the same time other cities that had parks—some Olmsted, some not—were rethinking these parks for the same reasons. To improve safety and sightlines and the ability to maintain them, cities had reimagined and redesigned their parks and were having great success with it. I was really inspired by seeing the renewal of parks that had once fallen into disuse because they weren't safe and were overgrown and undermaintained. New York did some really fine work on the renovation of Central Park and the park behind the public library. These were great success stories that were happening just as we were redesigning the Fine Arts Garden.

TZ There's still work to be done here. There are still some infrastructure issues. Getting back to the planning side of it: the idea that there never was a master plan for this whole thing still amazes me, and there have been an awful lot of landscape architects who have had a hand in various pieces of it. But the Olmsted part of it hasn't



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changed that much, and I think we're fortunate that the work on Wade Oval, which had changed a lot, really meshes well with this other side.

JS What our expansion project forced us to do was to reconcile the Dan Kiley plan on the Breuer side [developed by landscape designer Kiley to complement the Breuer addition of 1971]—which is a very minimal, flat landscape: green lawn meets building—with the incredible romanticism and classicism on the 1916 side. Fortunately you guys were around to work on the west section where the two come together, and I think it's going to be a really nice thing to see each spring.

TZ I think the west side works very well with the Olmsted Brothers' plan. It's a very passive, pretty park-like area already, so that was fairly easy to do, to get that to flow naturally. The situation in the 1990s, which you already touched on, really brought to the fore these issues of security and maintainability. Everybody talks about sustainability these days, and my theory is if it's not maintainable, it's not sustainable. That was really one of the focuses.

JS When you talked about things remaining to be done, one of those—and Rockefeller Park is going through the same thing right now—is that some of these parks

were stripped of a lot of valuable monuments. We still are missing the heron fountains that used to be on either side of the lagoon, that were just beautiful. I'd love to be able to go back and recreate those things.

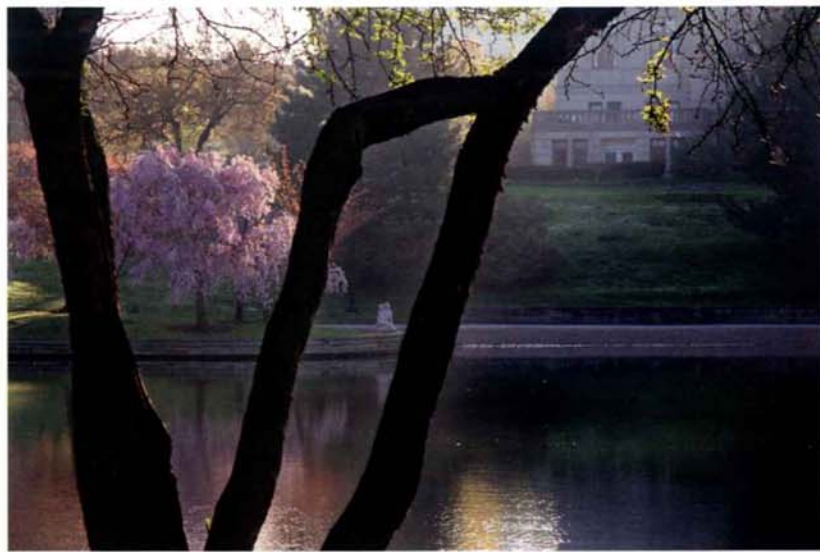
TZ And there was a fountain in the center of the lagoon.

JS There was, but that was before the Olmsted plan. When the Olmsted Brothers looked at it, they decided the lagoon should be natural and there shouldn't be anything in it.

TZ I don't know that I've seen those heron fountains.

JS Beautiful bronze fountains depicting rings of herons with frogs around the base. They were stolen and now there's nothing but a concrete block on each side with a pipe coming out of it. We developed a proposal based on photographs. It would be doable.

TZ One of the other things that's going to have an interesting impact on Wade Park is Case Western Reserve University's new western campus. If a footbridge gets built and there's a flow of traffic across the park, the better it is for everyone. It makes it safer, and it's certainly an area that more people will experience and enjoy. I expect there are a lot of Case students who never come over here.



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JS When I arrived there was a kind of siege mentality around the garden. There was actually a reluctance to light it because they thought that would attract more people and lead to more crime. Now we're taking the opposite approach, but there are still some of those old signs with lists of prohibitions and we kind of chuckle at them. We really want people to use this park. Now that the sightlines are good and the lighting is good, it's really best to have as many people use it as possible.

TZ The more people who use it, the safer it is. I've often wondered why there isn't more public art in the Fine Arts Garden.

JS My own opinion is that the Olmsted Brothers did a great job working with the museum and the garden club in creating the pieces that were designed for this space—the fountain, the zodiac—and I'm kind of reluctant to add elements that weren't part of a design that works so well. I hate to mess with it.

TZ So we just ought to put back the missing pieces.

JS I look to restoring the missing pieces, maybe adding some sculpture to the west and further developing sculpture gardens to the north where I think sculptural elements were never really much considered. And then there's yet a third layer, of the residual sculptures like the *Koćuszko*, from the old Wade Park that were here when this project began and either got moved a few feet or didn't get moved at all. I kind of like the idea that those are the memory of the place before this all got started.

TZ We also talked about trying to make this more of an all-seasons garden—particularly in the spring. We did get some drifts of bulbs in, but I think more could be done. I think this could evolve into a really spectacular spring showcase.

JS It's pretty good now—those cherries we put in are really something.

TZ Part of the problem here is that the garden is all below the surrounding street. To really see it, you've got to get in it. It's hard to drive by and really appreciate what's going on. And unless you're real lucky, you've got to go somewhere else to park.

JS You're right—parking is probably the biggest obstacle to the use of it. Hopefully, with the student population here, I think there will be folks actually walking between classes across this space, and that provides an opportunity we didn't always have.

TZ To this point, the concept has been to keep that west slope pretty natural.

JS Case has been working on its west campus pedestrian bridge idea and coming up with the same response, which is to connect all the pathways. The idea is you could join the bridge at a couple of different moments—you don't have to get on it at the top of the hill. It makes the park more permeable, and the multiple entry points will really increase activity in this area and on the other side.

TZ Originally the bridge was to remain airborne all the way across. Now one of the options is putting it on a mound through part of the park. It's probably a better solution in a number of ways, but that mound would



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significantly change the appearance of the park. That's kind of important because the things that are going on here—in terms of how structures, how walls, how steps, and all that was done—are of the Schweinfurth period, and it would be nice if this all somehow recognized that [the reference being to Charles F. Schweinfurth, one of Cleveland's preeminent architects, who in the late 19th and early 20th centuries designed homes for some of the city's most prominent families, several buildings on the Case campus, and four landmark stone bridges that cross Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard]. We're getting a little off subject here . . .

JS No, not really. It's interesting, it's like whether you believe that should be an intervention like the *Viňoly* interventions were in our plan, or whether it should be an extension of the historic fabric.

TZ If they don't try to pick up on the historic fabric, then I think it should be one of those designs that doesn't try to call a lot of attention to itself.

JS Right, and that's the direction they're taking. The first plan I saw was a real "look at me" sort of contemporary gesture. Now it seems to be something that's a little bit less about that and more about the rolling landscape to support it. I like the way they're going with it.

TZ I think a really important legacy is that what was vital about the original Olmsted plan remains. I think we've been reasonably successful at that. In terms of the whole idea of sustainability, we've tried to reduce the maintenance requirement to the point where it matches the facility's ability to do it—that seems to keep changing, but I think we're still there. But we've also laid out sort of a path because there are other things that still need to be done. I do think that people need to be reminded that these things need to be looked at again occasionally. It's already been 13 years since we did the master plan, and at some point down the road the museum ought to take another look. The lighting that was put in here, frankly I didn't think that would ever get done to the level that it got done—it's remarkable. That sort of changes some of the

things you can do in the future that you might not have been able to do otherwise. So I think there's a good base to work from, but as to the idea that this is finished—it's never finished. It will be interesting to see what this new area looks like when the new bridge goes in, and that may be a good time to take another look.

JS That's one thing about landscape design: it's always an evolution. You're always responding to changes.

TZ Somebody asked me the other day in an interview what my favorite plant is. I knew it was a trap, so I said "plastic." It's the only way you ever get a plant that does exactly what you expect and it stays that way! The other thing that's going on is University Circle's CircleWalk walking tour program, and part of the goal of that is to explain some of the area's cultural history. I don't think many people really appreciate how all this happened. We know, but we're a minority. That's one more thing that will bring more traffic and educate people a bit.

JS The whole rejuvenation of this part of University Circle, with MoCA and everything—

TZ It's the most vital part of town!

JS It's amazing how, in contrast to the situation when this place was in decline, how different the landscape is—metaphorically speaking.

TZ This park used to be viewed as sort of the edge, but now you've got the Cleveland Clinic and new Case campus to the west, and this becomes the center.

JS Absolutely, between the clinic and on the opposite side the university expansion, this is the center. And this does look like the center—even though until now it's always been on the edge!

TZ And that's the dramatic close to this interview. A gorgeous park that was once an edge is now the center of the most vital part of this whole metropolitan region. ■■■

