The following interview took place in January 2022 as part of the video production for the Arboretum Foundation’s annual gala, “The Art of Nature.” Due to time constraints, we could only use a small portion of it in the final cut of the video. Here is the full transcript of the interview, edited and adapted for print:

Olmsted Legacy & Design Principles

**JM:** Who was Frederick Law Olmsted, and why is he such an important figure in the world of landscape architecture?

**JO:** Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. (1822–1903) was all sorts of things—an author, conservationist, civic activist, abolitionist, public servant. He had quite a varied career, but he’s best known as the founder of the discipline of landscape architecture in the United States.

He is most famous for designing—with his partner, Calvert Vaux—Central Park, in New York City (in 1857), and Prospect Park, in Brooklyn (in 1865). He also did an amazing amount of writing and speaking, in which he really developed Americans’ ideas of the need and importance of public spaces.

Along with Vaux, he developed the idea of a parks system. So it’s not just that you need a one-off park. As enormous as Central Park is, it’s not enough on its own. For a healthy city, you need a network of boulevards and parks. He essentially set the framework that is still in use today. It’s the bedrock of how landscape architects look at creating public spaces.

**JM:** Who were the Olmsted Brothers?

**JO:** The Olmsted Brothers are part of a chain of design firms—it’s quite the convoluted list—but it starts with Olmsted Sr. and Vaux in the 1850s. And then it continues on down through various iterations of partners, and when Olmsted Sr. retired, his protégé John Charles Olmsted—who was his nephew and stepson—joined with his half-brother, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., known as “Rick,” to form the Olmsted Brothers firm.
John had worked with his stepfather for several decades, so he was well imbued with the Olmstedian design principles. Rick had been involved with teaching at Yale and other activities that also led him to be deeply invested in the philosophy of Olmsted design. So the two of them really carried forward that tradition and expanded it to the West Coast and further afield from where Olmsted Sr. had worked.

JM: What are the Olmstedian principles?

JO: The main principles that underline their work are very familiar. It’s how do you move people through space? The circulation patterns really matter. They need to make sense, and they need to be designed so that you don’t have competing uses of space. Olmsted Sr. had a great quote explaining that a park needs to be the opposite of a city sidewalk, where you can walk without thinking, where you can just follow a very intuitive path through space.

The design also needs to take its surroundings into account. For example, is it next to a more formal space, like a residential neighborhood, or is it adjoining a commercial district? The park or landscape needs to respond to that surrounding.

The design also needs to capture the genius of place—or what it is about a place that’s special—and build around that rather than try to create what is special about a place. Taking advantage of views—particularly of water and mountains—was important to Olmsted, as was incorporating existing water features.

Another principle is one that we call sustainability today, though I’m not sure Olmsted would’ve used that word. It’s the idea that a park needs to fit in its place. So you wouldn’t put a palm tree in Detroit, right? Because it would need to be constantly tended or replaced. And also this idea that if you are working within the
place that you are, then you should be responsive to the environment that you’re in. And that encompasses everything from including native vegetation to handling water and all those sorts of things.

Another element is that, within the park, there should be a logical coordination of spaces and uses. So, more active and programmed spaces with specific purposes should be more formally designed, whereas more passive places that have less direction in how they should be used—such as a large lawn or a path through the woods—should be more informal and rustic. And so you sort of get cues as to how a place should be used by the design that surrounds you.

Olmsted Brothers Come to Seattle

JM: Can you tell us about how the Olmsted Brothers came to Seattle?

JO: It started with a letter that a Seattle Electric Company engineer wrote in 1902 to the Olmsted Brothers—who were based in Brookline, Massachusetts—with a question that addressed a very specific, small problem about how to run a street car through Woodland Park. It didn’t really merit a trip out to the West Coast, and so the Olmsted firm kind of discouraged the City from bringing them on. But that exchange very quickly developed into the idea of having the Olmsted Brothers come out to design a park system.

There were several contributing factors at play here. Portland was about to host the World’s Fair, and the Olmsted brothers were going to design the fairgrounds. So, now you have a bigger pull to bring one of the designers out to the West Coast.

Additionally, Seattle’s civic leaders knew that they needed to develop a park system in this rapidly growing city. The Gold Rush had happened just a few years before, and Seattle’s population was growing by leaps and bounds.

And there was always a concern that Seattle was not a “real city.” We still hear that today a little bit. The thinking was: “If we get a park system, then that will make us a legitimate and real city. And there’s no better way to get a legitimate and real park system than to bring in the Olmsteds.” They were just synonymous with legitimacy at that time. And so they brought them out in the spring of 1903 and had John Olmsted design a park system for the entire city.

John explored the city, mapping out existing public and private parkland, and potential connections in between. In just two months, he delivered his comprehensive design proposal to the Seattle Board of Park Commissioners, linking Seattle’s open and green spaces with an elaborate system of parkways and boulevards. Detailed plans for developing parks such as Volunteer Park, Cal Anderson Park and others would soon follow.

History of the Arboretum Land and Washington Park

JM: Switching focus to the history of the Arboretum itself: What do we know about the people who lived here prior to Euro-American settlement? And how did they use this land?

JO: The place where the Arboretum is today has been used by people for millennia. They were known collectively as the Xacuabs (pronounced...
hah-choo-ahbsh) or “people of the large lake.” They were closely related to the Duwamish people, who lived on the Black River and along the Duwamish River. They’re part of the larger Coast Salish people, and it’s an interesting location right there in the Arboretum wetlands. Arboretum Creek is a source of freshwater, as well as the freshwater plants that would’ve drawn people there. The native people knew the place as stáłal (pronounced stáhLahL), which translates to “baby fathom.” There’s locational information in the name, telling you that it is a useful place with a lot of natural resources.

It’s also interesting to look at it within the context of the surrounding area. There was a large village, about where University Village is located today. And there was also the water passageway that—even prior to the construction of the Ship Canal—was a transportation route through that area. So the Arboretum would’ve been right along the way that people travelled between freshwater and saltwater. And it would have been a meeting place where people came together.

JM: The Arboretum was built in Washington Park. Can you talk about how this park came into existence?

JO: Washington Park was one of the earliest parks brought into the Seattle park system, and it came about through a coincidence of infrastructure that was being built at time and a certain parcel of land reaching the point where it needed infrastructure. In the second half of the 19th century, the pattern that you see in Seattle is logging companies coming in and purchasing land that had been recently ceded through the Treaty of Point Elliot (the 1855 lands settlement treaty between the U.S. government and the Native American tribes of the Puget Sound region). The companies took the first swipe at the logging, and they would take the biggest and best trees, drop them into the water, and get them to the sawmills. The area that became Washington Park was cut over by the Puget Mill Company in the 1880s. And then the question became, “What’s to be done with it next?”

The lumber company didn’t want to wait for the trees to grow back, so they looked for other ways to gain income from the land. The idea they came up with, of course—and you see this happening across the City—was to subdivide the land for development. But in order to have a subdivision, you need to have water. So, in 1900, the Puget Mill Company decided to swap the City of Seattle 62 acres of land in order to get water to the adjacent subdivision that is now Broadmoor. That 62 acres became the nucleus of Washington Park, which grew bigger over the following decades through various acquisitions.

JM: Considering the logging history, what do you think the landscape of Washington Park looked like when the city began to take possession of that land in 1900?

JO: It’s interesting to think about what the landscape looked like in Seattle, right after the logging occurred. We have early photographs of Washington Park, and we can get a sense from some notes that the Olmsted Brothers made while they were here in Seattle, that there
were some random trees—standing trees that were not useful for lumbering. There was lots of underbrush—just think about all the salal, huckleberry, and other native plants that we see in the Arboretum understory today. There was also lots of dead vegetation left behind from the logging, so the park would have been quite messy.

It was, however, not completely scraped clean, or clear cut. Remnant forest remained in places where it was hard to get the trees out—particularly in the hillier part of the park. Some of those trees would have just been left behind because they weren’t worth taking out.

**Designing the Boulevard: 1904–06**

**JM:** The Olmsted Brothers did design work at the Arboretum property on two distinct occasions. Describe the first—the laying out of Lake Washington Boulevard and specifying the Boulevard plantings, from 1904 to 1906.

**JO:** Right after the Olmsted Brothers were brought out to do the city park system on two distinct occasions. Describe the first—the laying out of Lake Washington Boulevard and specifying the Boulevard plantings, from 1904 to 1906.

**JO:** Right after the Olmsted Brothers were brought out to do the city park system, the Board of Park Commissioners decided that they needed to develop some key properties in order to sell the idea of the park system because they knew they were going to have to go to voters for bond issues to help finance it all. They wanted to give residents a taste of what could be, and the easiest way to do that was on property they already owned.

They looked at a Washington Park and decided, for reasons of economy, that they would only have the Olmsted Brothers lay out the Boulevard that would cross through the park. Eventually they wanted that boulevard to extend to Seward Park and up to the University of Washington campus. But they were just looking at that first segment, and the Olmsted Brothers were flummoxed, because—as John Charles wrote to the Park Commissioners—you don’t design a park for a roadway, you design a roadway for a park.

John pushed and pushed, and tried to get them to hire the firm to do the whole park. He even wrote a letter to Charles Saunders, an architect who was one of the commissioners, in which he likened the job to Charles being hired to design just a corner of a building, and then having to wait to hopefully get to finish the rest of it. It made no sense.

But the Board of Park Commissioners was faced with a pretty small budget. And really, they were thinking more about what they could show off in the fastest amount of time. So they asked the Olmsteds to design the Boulevard, and the firm agreed to do it. However, John Charles and his associate, Percy Jones, couldn’t resist enhancing the design with nods to the future development of the park. There’s a great map showing that he and Percy went through and marked all the places along the Boulevard for potential view corridors—because they didn’t want to design a roadway that would miss an opportunity in the future.

They laid out the Boulevard, and it was built fairly quickly. There was quite a bit of frustration with the City engineering department and the topographical maps for the site, but they completed the section of the Boulevard, and it was very popular with Seattle residents. The plan featured several hallmarks of an Olmsted
design. It curved gently and gracefully along the Arboretum valley floor and featured a walking path running parallel to it. In keeping with the park surroundings, the plantings along the drive were informal and included many native species. To mark the Madison Park south entry, more formal rows of tall trees were planned.

**Genesis of the Arboretum Design**

**JM:** How about the second time the Olmsted Brothers came and did work in the Arboretum?

**JO:** It’s interesting because, between the first time and the second time that the Olmsted Brothers were brought out to do design work in Washington Park, the park kind of developed a life of its own. The vegetation recovered somewhat, and the park was very popular for horseback riding. There was also a cart-horse racing track where Azalea Way is today, sited on the former skid road used by the loggers. At the height of the Great Depression, when leaders were brainstorming shovel-ready projects—projects where people could be put to work immediately to relieve the unemployment situation—they looked at creating an Arboretum in the park.

In the mid-1930s, the governor of Washington, Clarence Martin, was looking for places to put money from the State Emergency Relief Administration, and it could only be spent on labor. He needed something that could get started right away. He asked his advisor, Loren Grinstead, for ideas, and Lauren’s wife, Edna—who happened to be a member of the Seattle Garden Club—jumped at the opportunity because she knew how much the University of Washington wanted to develop an arboretum in Washington Park.

The governor liked the idea, but they were then faced with the difficulty of financing it. If they could only use the federal funds to pay for labor, how were they going get a design that would direct that labor? They didn’t want to just set loose a bunch of people to clear underbrush and not have a plan.

Enter Sophie Krauss, who had been a client of the Olmsted Brothers firm for her private residence on Lake Washington Boulevard—and was also a member of the Seattle Garden Club. Designing private residences was a really important component of the Olmsted Brothers work out here. It was sort of a private subsidy for their public work, making trips out to the West Coast more reasonable and economical.

James Frederick (“Fred”) Dawson—who succeeded John Olmsted at the firm after he passed in 1920—had become close friends with many of the people on whose private residences he worked. He stayed in Seattle most of the time that the firm worked on these homes. Sophie remembered Fred and proposed that the Garden Club bring him out to do a plan. And that’s what happened: The Seattle Garden Club actually paid the $3000 fee for the design that made the Arboretum possible. (There was no other money in the budget that would have made this happen.) Finally, they were able to get an Olmsted design for the whole park!
Dawson completed the Arboretum plan in March 1936. He had to rush it to keep up with the workers being paid with relief funds who had already begun to clear land for development. In keeping with how other botanic gardens were developed in those days—and with the educational mission of the university—Dawson used a taxonomic system to organize plant groupings according to their ancestral and evolutionary relationships. He also laid out plans for the park’s structures, buildings, wetland lagoons, trails, and a new road—Arboretum Drive—plus, of course, its pivotal design feature, Azalea Way.

It was a very general, schematic plan that didn’t include actual plant lists. However, the firm was invited back in 1938 to create a detailed planting plan for Azalea Way. Creating the promenade took 10,000 hours of hand labor and 500 railroad cars of compost. When it was completed in 1940, crews had planted 500 trees and 2100 azaleas.

**Olmsted’s Legacy at the Arboretum**

**JM:** Implementation of the plan and the development of the plant collections took place over the following years and decades, with various Arboretum directors (most notably, Brian Mulligan), staff, and local designers leading the way. A number of modifications were made to the Olmsted Brothers’ taxonomic design in order to site plants according to their cultural requirements. Some features, like the Rose Garden at the south end, were never realized. What are some key elements of the Arboretum today that we can say for sure are Olmstedian?

**JO:** The Arboretum that we visit today still has some pretty significant pieces that are Olmstedian and date back to those original plans. One of my favorites is that when you enter the Arboretum on the Madison Street side, you see that wonderful allée of oaks and sycamores, and those date to the original 1904 plan (see photo page 23). Here, you’re transitioning from a more formal landscape of the residential neighborhood into the more rustic and naturalistic environment of the Arboretum. That’s the only place in the Arboretum where you really see trees in a long row. (There’s one other smaller allée, on Arboretum Drive, as you move into the park from the north end.) That more formal design is part of the transition as you enter the space, and I love that. You can see it, too, in the design of the Rose Garden that was supposed to be where the ball field is today. That is a much more formal and regimented space than anywhere else you see in the original Arboretum design.

Another piece of the design that I love that’s still there is the Pinetum, along the Arboretum’s northwestern border. That was laid out in just the right spot and has flourished. Other major collections that match the plan include the Oak Family, Magnolia Family and Heath Family (in Rhododendron Glen). But tallying up the successes also points out one of the challenges with the 1934 plan, in that the Olmsted firm could not get the plans fast enough from the city engineers, so that they could fully understand the topography and the hydrological...
situations—where the landscape was boggy, and where it was drier. They laid out the Arboretum in the taxonomic pattern, but they weren’t always able to match the plant families exactly to the best conditions for growing them. So, since the plan was delivered, the life of the Arboretum has been somewhat about readjustment and responsiveness to that. Overall, though, the park has stayed true to its naturalistic, Olmstedian character.

On Azalea Way, you still see the interior view, which is an amazing Olmsted design element that takes advantage of the access created by the racetrack. Instead of obliterating the track and trying to reshape it, they took advantage of it. It’s that genius of place we talked about! And you have this wonderful walk through the core of the Arboretum that is flanked by a multi-storey canopy. You see the low plants, the shorter trees, and the taller trees. There are not many places in Seattle parks where you really get to enjoy that multi-storey canopy. It just hasn’t survived as well elsewhere.

Another interior view that I love—and it’s actually my favorite one in the Arboretum—is from Lookout Gazebo on the north end of what today is the New Zealand Forest. It looks across the valley, and if we didn’t have that view, it would be hard to really understand the topography of Washington Park Arboretum. It also gives you that sense of looking inward into the park and really feeling lost in the trees.

In Seattle, John Olmsted mostly designed his large parks so they looked outside of the park. He loved our mountains and our water, so he designed lots of landscapes that looked outside the park, and he borrowed that landscape and brought it into the designs. But in Washington Park, you see the opposite of that. There were some pleasing views planned for the water line, but primarily he gave us ways to look through the park and enjoy the feeling of being lost in the woods.

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