

Olympic Sculpture Park



Green Design & the City – ENVS 662

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Introduction

The Olympic Sculpture Park in Seattle, Washington is an exciting new park. The design enhances the skyline, takes advantage of views to the Olympic Mountains across Elliott Bay, and provides much needed green space to downtown Seattle. It also houses a Who's Who of contemporary sculpture amassed by the deep-pocket benefactors of the Seattle Art Museum and Seattle's recent biotech boom. But this park is exciting to me for two other reasons. It repaired damaged land and created valuable wildlife habitat. I will start with a discussion of green space in Seattle, talk about the site for the park, how it came to be and its amenities, and then I'll discuss its value as a green and sustainable place.

The Emerald City

Seattle's nickname is the Emerald City. I've heard many people speculate about how she got that name. Is it the beautiful Olympic and Cascade Mountain ranges that fill her horizons to the



west and east respectively? Or is it the preponderance of green tinted glass on many of her downtown skyscrapers that glint emerald in the afternoon sun (and yes there is often afternoon sun). Those who haven't been to the city might think this name comes from an abundance of parks within the city limits. And while the two former facts of the city may be responsible for the nickname, the latter is not true. While the Parks Department claims that 6,200 acres of the city are devoted to 430 parks, and that it has over 24 miles of shoreline,¹ what it doesn't explain is that much of the shoreline is wrapped in vertical seawall and the majority of the parks are outside of the downtown

core. Downtown Seattle is a lot of metal, glass, and concrete. A quick glance at the map of Downtown Seattle Parks & Public Space² shows how little green space there really is. The four

¹ www.seattle.gov/parks/Publications/ParkActionPlan.htm

² <http://www.seattle.gov/parks/projects/downtown/ReportSummary.pdf>

largest open spaces are the Freeway Park near the Convention Center, Myrtle Edwards Park along the shore north of downtown, and two venues not operated by the Parks Department – the Seattle Center, which is the home of the 1962 World’s Fair and Seattle’s landmark Space Needle, and, the topic of this paper, the Olympic Sculpture Park located on the southern edge of Myrtle Edwards Park.

Brownfield to Public Space

The Olympic Sculpture Park is an 8.5 acre parcel of land bordered by Western Avenue to the East, Broad Street to the south, Elliott Bay to the west, and Bay Street to the north. The land drops 40 feet from the east edge of the site down to the shore and is transected by a very active railroad and a four lane arterial road. It is the former site of the Union Oil Company of



Property of Museum of History & Industry, Seattle

California’s (Unocal) oil transfer facility that was in operation from 1910 to 1970. Unocal closed the facility and began cleanup of petroleum contamination on the property in the 1990s. Over the course of the remediation, Unocal removed 117,000 tons of contaminated soil and 15,000 liters of petroleum. The site was to be capped with 200,000 cubic yards of clean fill³ in

preparation for sale to developers for more condominiums in the fast growing Belltown community that surrounds the site. As the last piece of undeveloped waterfront in the city, this was prime Seattle real estate.

In 1999, as Unocal was finishing its remediation and preparing to fill the site, the Seattle Art Museum (SAM), in collaboration with Washington Mutual Bank (WAMU), was beginning expansion of its downtown art museum. NBBJ had designed a 42-story office tower for WAMU and SAM was to occupy the ground floors in a dramatic new space designed by Allied Works that would tie well with the existing museum, built in 199,1 and designed by Venturi Scott

³ Huber

Brown.⁴ Then director of the museum, Mimi Gates (mother of Bill Gates, Microsoft’s founder), spearheaded the plans for the sculpture park with the backing of her well-endowed Board and many art lovers.⁵ The Unocal site would be perfect to house SAM’s growing sculpture collection as well as a convenient place to dispose of 93,000 cubic yards of fill⁶ from the excavation for the new museum and office tower. A deal was brokered; Unocal got the remaining fill it needed, capped the site, and sold its prime 8.5 acres to SAM for \$17 million.⁷ Funding for the purchase came from Jon and Mary Shirley (former Microsoft CEO), with additional funds from a large capital donation from museum benefactors, and from the Trust for Public Lands.⁸

Design

SAM conducted an international design competition for the future sculpture park and reviewed 52 submissions. The winning design was by Marion Weiss and Michael Manfredi (Weiss/Manfredi) of New York. “According to a recent monograph, the program for the sculpture park fit perfectly with the architects’ dedication to creating ‘linkages where separation now exists’ – be they conceptual, formal, or professional.”⁹ Weiss/Manfredi oriented the park to capture views of the mountains, sound and water. Connecting a series of outdoor rooms, the angled zigzag path that dominates the design creates a forced perspective that makes the site look bigger and distances longer. “This is an urban park that doesn’t take you away from it all as much as put you in touch with things you didn’t know could work together; sculpture, trains, quaking aspen,



⁴ Carter

⁵ Farr

⁶ Huber

⁷ Pearson

⁸ Huber

⁹ Huber

slabs of pre-cast concrete, and a z-shaped gravel path.”¹⁰ The architects wanted to emphasize the cars and trains as part of Seattle’s history and the park’s urban setting so they opened views to the corridors and used industrial materials throughout the park. Materials used include precast



concrete for the retaining walls, poured concrete for the stairs and viewing platform, and an abundance of glass and steel throughout.¹¹

Aside from the native plantings and art that I’ll discuss later, the park includes the Paccar Pavilion at the Western Avenue entrance that holds exhibition, education, performance, and social

space as well as restrooms, a café, and an interpretive center. There are 50 parking spaces below the pavilion, and a green house enclosing the *Neukom Vivarium*, Mark Dion’s 60 foot nurse log.

The logistics of building in a seismically active area on top of a brownfield and over a major arterial road and an active rail corridor is challenging to say the least. Weiss/Manfredi used a modular system of precast concrete walls for the road and rail corridor retaining walls that are designed to shift and settle naturally with any seismic activity. The building roofs and park terraces direct rainwater through the plantings to slow runoff. Excess runoff is then collected in a drainage system beneath the terraces and discharged to Elliot Bay without coming in contact with the sealed industrial residue beneath the site that could contaminate any runoff.¹² Elliott Avenue and the railroad also had to stay open during construction, which they did.

Habitat

The separate zones created by the transecting transportation routes are further enhanced by three distinct ecological zones in the park. These plantings flow from high to low, east to west, much like the flow from the Cascade Mountains to the Sound and mimicking plants you might find in

¹⁰ Pearson

¹¹ Pearson

¹² Huber

such settings. The higher, city side of the park is planted with western red cedar, hemlock and Douglas fir that follow the slope down into the first display area of the park. Also planted in this section are western larch, ginko, metasequoia, dogwood, snowberry, evergreen huckleberry, and salal. Large meadows of grasses, native wildflowers, and Garry oak allow open views to many of the artworks in the middle plane of the park. A grove of quaking aspen under-planted with wood rose, flowering currant, and Oregon iris fill the western ground of the park. Along the beach is a shoreline garden and tidal terraces for salmon habitat and saltwater vegetation.¹³ This beach is the only one in downtown and serves as a reminder of the overlooked potential of Seattle's spectacular waterfront.¹⁴ Weiss/Manfredi wanted to restore the beach and aquatic zone to a "pre-urban state". They reinforced the vertical seawall shelves along the southwest edge of



the site with submerged buttresses and added about 50,000 tons of rock to create a 15' ledge of fish habitat. They also deepened the pocket beach and planted a variety of native shoreline plants.

The Parks Department found that algae had taken hold on this submerged reef within twelve months of construction "indicating the beginning of a

viable ecosystem."¹⁵ And the University of Washington has recently confirmed that salmon have returned to this section of the shore.¹⁶ The sighting of a baby seal on the beach is probably further evidence that the salmon are returning.

Art

Of course, what would a sculpture park be without the art? And this park has some significant works. In all, there are currently 21 works of art in the park. Alexander Calder's *Eagle* takes center stage from almost any view in the park because of its size and bright orange color. Other works include Anthony Caro's *Riviera*, Louise Bourgeois' *Father and Son* as well as a series of

¹³ SAM

¹⁴ Farr

¹⁵ Parks & Rec

¹⁶ Huber

Eye Benches, Louise Nevelson's *Sky Landscape I*, and Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's *Typewriter Eraser, Scale X*. Works commissioned for the park include Teresita Fernandez's *Seattle Cloud Cover*, which graces the path that crosses the train tracks, and Mark Dion's *Neukom Vivarium*. The *Neukom Vivarium* is a 60 foot live nurse log that is housed in its own greenhouse at the Broad Street and Elliot Avenue entrance to the park. Visitors are encouraged to use the provided hand-lenses to take a close look at the insects, fungi, lichen and myriad of plants that are part of the natural ecosystem of the log.



But the art is the part of the park that is suffering the most. There is a “do not touch” policy in the park but people can’t keep their hands, or their feet, or their bodies, off the sculptures. The park, while free and accessible 24/7, is monitored. Infra-red sensors trigger when someone enters the park after dark, security guards on foot and on bicycle roam the park at all hours, and security cameras monitor activity. But this doesn’t deter people from scratching their initials in the art or from climbing on them where buckles and grommets damage the works. The environment and local fauna are not friendly to the sculptures either. Birds leave their droppings on the works and booms and scaffolding have to be erected so the works can be cleaned. And while we might find the salt air of Elliot Bay refreshing, it is corrosive to wood and metal and many of the sculptures have had to be clear-coated. Alexander Calder’s *Eagle*’s bright orange paint fades in the sun and is also damaged by grass clippings that pile up around its base. The gardener has had to resort to hand cutting the lawn around the sculpture to control the clippings. And finally, the nurse log has been picked at by visitors and the greenhouse is now only open when a volunteer is on the premises.¹⁷

¹⁷ Eskinazi

Green & Sustainable

Over 40,000 people visited the park on the opening weekend and over 100,000 people came to the park in the following two weeks.¹⁸ This is an exciting space and has received much notice. Awards include: World Architecture Festival 2008 (category winner – Nature); EDRA/Places Awards 2008; American Architecture Award 2008; American Shore & Beach Preservation Association (top /restored beach); American Council of Engineering Companies 2008 Engineering Excellence Awards (grant award); Veronica Rudge Green Prize for Urban Design - Harvard School of Design (first U.S. project to win the biennial award); and American Society of Landscape Architects Honor Award.¹⁹

What makes this park sustainable? Aside from the fact that Seattleites love this park, it comes with its own endowment. As you can imagine, with the public buildings, the special rainwater collection system and seismic retrofits, the repair and protection of the art, and the carefully designed plantings, this is not a cheap space to maintain. The benefactors of the park have set aside a \$20 million endowment for the ongoing maintenance of the park and art works, and to ensure that the park is always free and open to the public.²⁰

What makes this park green? First, it provides connections in the area. It abuts Myrtle Edwards Park (home of Seattle's annual Hemp Fest and prime viewing for the annual 4th of July fireworks). Myrtle Edwards Park is a 1.25 mile long park that runs north along the shoreline towards the Inner Bay area west of Queen Anne Hill. In the past, this park was isolated by the Unocal brownfield and the entrance to the park was down a very dead-end looking path. The Olympic Sculpture Park provides a green connection with that park and the Alaskan Way retail and commercial area as well as providing open space for

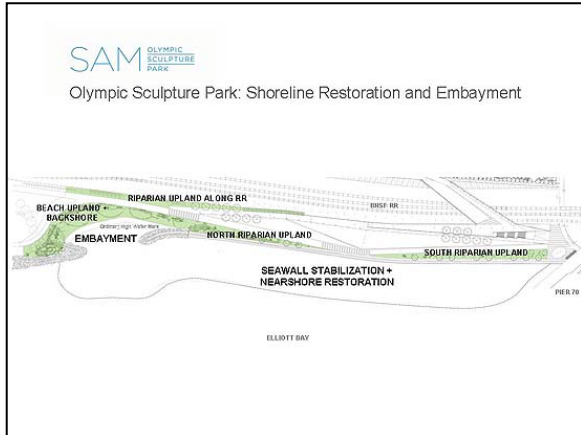


¹⁸ Hart

¹⁹ Weissmanfredi.com

²⁰ Hart

the residents of the surrounding Belltown area. Second, the site was a former brownfield that has been cleaned up and reused for the benefit of the general public. Third, the park grounds are maintained organically; they do not use any chemical pesticides or fertilizers. Fourth, the seawall and beach restoration has been a huge success. In fact, the seawall project is now touted



as a model for a \$30 million seawall restoration project that the Parks Department is undertaking from the south edge of the park to the Aquarium (about three-quarters of a mile south), and may also be implemented by the state ferry system further south of there.²¹ And finally, the park is being held up as an example of what can be done to revitalize the entire Seattle waterfront. Plans

are already underway to replace the Alaskan Way Viaduct – a double-decker roadway that was damaged by the 2001 earthquake and that blocks the city from the Bay. The viaduct is slated to be replaced by a two mile long deep-bore tunnel to begin construction in 2011. “The design community is going to relish the opportunity to give the kind of care and attention to the downtown waterfront that was given to the Olympic Sculpture Park, and continue that kind of quality to the entire central waterfront.”²²

²¹ Parks & Rec

²² Bennett

Resources

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