



Scoville Park
Focus Group Meeting # 4
Historic Preservation Focus Group
Oak Park Public Library, 834 Lake Street,
March 3, 2010, 5:00pm

Participants:

Redd Griffin, Hemingway Foundation & War Mem. Comm.
Mark Gartland, Park District Commissioner
Jean Guarino, War Memorial Committee
Victor Guarino, War Memorial Committee
Andrzej Dajnowski, Conservation of Sculpture & Objects Studio (CSOS)
Frank Lipo, Historical Society of Oak Park River Forest
Maggie Kelly, Park District Citizen Committee
Doug Kaarre, Village of Oak Park
Mark Jirik, Altamanu, Inc.
John Mac Manus, Altamanu, Inc.
Josephine Bellalta, Altamanu, Inc.

Introduction

Diane Stanke of the Park District thanked all attendees for coming and for their willingness to provide insight into Scoville Park. She delivered a brief overview of the parks' master planning process and spoke of several parks now completed and others currently in construction. Diane noted that Scoville is the seventeenth park of eighteen in the park district's master planning process. As part of the park planning process the focus groups meetings today and one tomorrow are primarily to aid Altamanu, the park planners, in understanding the complexities of Scoville Park and its context. The focus group meetings will be followed by community meetings that will also be held at the library. The first of these meetings will be held on Wednesday March 24th at 7pm. Altamanu Inc. was selected through an open and detailed public process. Diane encouraged the attendees to give freely of their ideas and opinions and then handed the presentation over to John Mac Manus of Altamanu.

John Mac Manus presented a brief overview on the history and current context of Scoville Park and followed with an examination of current day aerials and historic plans. John elaborated on some of the detail in the original 1913 Jensen plan and the changes that took place in the 60s

through 1980s. John asked the attendees to consider how Jensen's plan might be recreated or re-interpreted today.

History of the Park and the importance of the Jens Jensen Plan

The Scoville home was purchased in 1912 by the Park District and Jensen completed his design in 1913.

In Siftings, Jensen wrote about vignettes and scenes from his childhood landscape in Denmark and he also identified with the landscape of Illinois that was reminiscent of his homeland.

As he was designing the native landscape of Illinois was disappearing.

He was trying to save its essence by creating vignettes of this disappearing landscape. In his original plan for Scoville, some of these vignettes become apparent. (There was a detailed examination of the historic Jensen plan).

People in the previous meetings have talked today about preserving the Jensen spirit in this park but also said that dense or layered planting would create safety issues today.

Jensen planted dense and layered masses of native plant material in order to enclose the park from the surrounding urban environment. Today those shrub masses would impede sight lines in and out of the park. Keeping the Jensen spirit alive in today's context presents a challenge.

The comfort station was built in 1936 by architect Roy Hodgekiss. It is listed as part of the historic denomination. . (Later Douglas Kaare Urban Planner and Historian stated that the architect was William Pagels, and it was originally the First Church of Christ Scientist (1914).

A lot of the Jensen in the park is completely gone.

What do you see as Jensen's vision for this plan?

Jensen wanted to give people an escape from the city, he disliked the city environment. I believe he wanted to recreate the landscapes of his youth and this was also a memorial to what we were losing of the Illinois landscape. Today it would be an issue to recreate his plan in full, especially with what would have been these beautiful but incredibly dense masses of plantings.

How should we approach this then?

Many things remain the same in terms of their broader locations like the comfort station, the tennis courts, and the meadow.

This park was like an Eden for me when I was younger. There was a black iron fence that went around the park and the park was much lusher then than it is today.

We have a picture of the fence. (Historic photos were examined)

The fence would have helped control the desire lines that are a problem today.

It may have been the original (fence) from the Scoville home

Can we assume the trees not labeled on the Jensen plan are existing oaks?

Jensen was quoted in an interview saying he wanted to preserve a grove of oaks that stood on top of the ridge in the park

The challenge is Oak Park is becoming more urban. A vision statement of what Jensen was after has to be integrated into this design.

You have the intersection of Oak Park's geologic history, human history, and the story of Kettlestring settling under some oaks he had rested under on his journey. It is almost biblical. You have the old and new world of the Scovilles functioning at the corner of Oak Park Ave. and Lake St. and around this park. All of it is still functioning today.

The 1st Baptist Church, the Hemingway museum, and Oak Park club all with their own histories. All of these things we're talking about now were part of Scoville's legacy. Did he have a vision for this or was there some type of planning for this?

A lot of the work would have been done by his son Charles. As far as I know there wasn't so much a master plan as much as he wanted to create a neighborhood.

Incorporating Jensen's Plan and History into the Park Design

The park is on the National Registrar of Historic Places. Are there some items from his plan that could be brought back appropriately?

Could we bring back some heavy planting that is more open to the library?

Is there a space, at least in one area, where there could be an example of Jensen's original dense planting? Maybe on the eastern middle of the park?

The area in the east that is in full sun could be a great spot for some diverse selections of grasses native to the Illinois landscape

What's striking on the 1913 Jensen plan is the amount of hawthorns, crabapples, and plums; it would have been beautiful in spring. Jensen has not used any grasses in this plan but that does not mean we cannot use them. They were part of a later template he developed.

A fence could provide a barrier at the corners to preserve the path layout and still provide adequate visibility.

Black Oaks are a strong part of Oak Park's history – planting some would be a wonderful historic addition. I am sure they were there on top of the hill.

Instead of getting stuck on Jensen's specific plantings you could pick his vision and take on an abstracted view point of that. Maybe you add a new water feature and use the campfire idea and base a theme around the elements.

Part of the reason Scoville made it onto the registrar of historic places is because there was a concern that the park's boundaries were eroding or being blurred. One example is the parking cut into the north edge of the park.

A fence could define the original park boundaries

I think in certain areas we could use fences.

There is an opportunity to use plantings to both separate the library from the park but also to use them to help unfold a view from the library into the park.

Another option is to use a historic line of shallow but dense, colorful plants that could help define the edge as Jensen did.

Henrietta wanted to get rid of the current timber planters in exchange for some planters at the corners with a mixed perennial border.

It's currently all annuals, it looks good but it's a lot of work.

But those flowers are beautiful – I'm surprised.

But they are not very much in keeping with Jensen or sustainability.

Historic Fountain

The original horse carriage way into the park on Lake St. is still there. The fountain could go back to its original location and the break in the walls could be made into a central entry.

One side of the fountain was used by horses and the sidewalk side by people.

The cars and current use (of the street) could make that a little difficult.

The fountain is only a replica.

Council Ring/Camp Fire and a new Space near the Peace Memorial

There is a rudimentary camp fire/council ring in the plan.

Is there a chance for an appropriate bonfire (Council Ring)? It was such a key element in many of his designs. There are so many peace vigils at the monument already; could a fire pit become a part of that? There could be more seating making it into an even more pronounced area for gatherings.

Maybe a space that is like the council ring but larger?

The council ring at Columbus and some of the plantings there give a good idea of Jensen.

Could we re-imagine a council ring by the monument?

Are there any council rings in Chicago that really work?

The one in Columbus was recently renovated and there have been several articles on it. It's mostly used at night and is surrounded by needles, beer bottles, and such. The argument is that it was important to restore for everyone, not just for the current users who seem to neglect it.

Interpretive Signage

People get off the train and there is no signage to direct them to the park or historic sites.

A piece of signage with a master key at the southeast entrance that illustrates exactly what Jensen elements are original, modified, recreated, etc. would help visitors understand his history in the park.

This could be a teaching park, there's a place for signage between the library and the park.

There's already the Unity Temple and the Hemingway Museum nearby; if you really want to make this park about Jensen then couldn't it just be about Jensen?

I love the idea of putting some type of order to the memorials. A Hemingway memorial could be at the corner with the Frank Lloyd Wright fountain and the Kettlestrings memorial could be moved to be south of the monument. It could be a Washington Mall type of thing.

The park could act as a great overview of Oak Park history.

We could certainly put some interpretive signage by the library.

The monument changed the whole character of the park, it's such a dominant feature separate from the Jensen plan.

You could include it in an entire narrative of the park, from beginning to end, that becomes your plan.

I think it would be highly successful. If you use history and a strong vision in an assertive way you can gain a better respect for the park and some of these problems may go away.

There could be three major locations for educational signage, at the plaza on Oak Park Ave, at the monument in a plaza and in the library plaza.

Visually, I think the park is a hodge-podge of different elements. It needs a unifying theme. It could be genius if it was successful. The ability to find the thread that connects everything in this park together will be essential.

If we add interpretive signage and other elements that really do the park's history right we may be able to change the psychology of some users and instill a new sense of pride. Some of the undesirables may leave the park alone.

Southwest Corner of Park

The southwest corner is one of my concerns. You can walk by almost every day and smell pot and when I do I walk into the library and tell security. It can be a very confrontational area as well. It is not very welcoming.

If you eliminate the seating in the area maybe it would help

In all of our meetings this has come up as a problem area. The police especially have an issue with this area because it's hard to see into.

Almost no one uses that extra entry into the corner.
Almost nothing is left of what Jensen had there originally.
The pond is gone but there are evergreens on his plan and there are some there today.

Monument

In working on the renovation of the monument we found the original foundation of the Scoville home.
I think the monument needs to have more dramatic lighting instead of the basic floodlights there now.
From my experience I've found wherever there is more light on a monument there is less graffiti.
My request is that you do not plant large trees next to the sculpture. Trees that are too big and next to the monument will overwhelm it.
The current monument is 30' tall.
Perhaps grasses in front of the sculpture with better lighting could be good?
Could have a planted area with grasses and no large trees with a gathering space in front of the monument
The benches at the top of the hill only face towards the monument. They should look both ways.
Yes, you only end up looking at the people walking by; it's too far from the monument.
The monument almost has to be treated independently of the rest of the park.
It draws people to it.
You should be able to sit on the steps of the monument and look out onto the park
Currently there is a problem with skateboarders ruining the monument steps.
We could use gravel or something like it to deter them.
The monument is a very significant feature, I wouldn't move it. I would consider it becoming an Oak Park historic landmark.
I agree, I think it would be a great historic monument at the state level as well.

Playground

How about expanding the playground further south with an area for older kids.
Yes that could work
And join the plaza on Grove more with the park.

Paths/Circulation

The path system has changed from Jensen's original design and there are several evident desire lines running through the park
We could so easily get back to the original walkways in a meandering way. Could the paths be changed to their original layout and not negatively affect the monument?
I think so.
I think whoever designed the changes to the paths had some neo-classical leanings. He started to straighten all of the paths out and arranged them in a symmetric way around the monument.
I like the concept of bringing the paths back up towards the monument to create more space in the meadow.
The path closer to Oak Park Avenue could be brought back if it doesn't damage too many trees.

Stage

The current stage is temporary and is erected and dismantled every year. Some issues include the effect on the grass, teenagers going underneath it or playing on it when it's not in use, and it obstructs some views into the park.

Most people so far have asked for a solution that is more permanent.

I like the idea of a permanent stage.

It could be something minimal or serve multiple uses when it isn't a stage.

The Scovilles, being so community friendly as they were, used their property like a public park before it became one. They had a bandstand set up in the southwestern corner about where the problem area is now.

Maybe a permanent bandstand could be set up there.

It may take some getting used to.

I like the idea of putting the bandstand there.

The stage could be permanent with a shell that could be removed.

Jensen had outdoor theatres at Columbus Park if we wanted to take a page out of his book

If visibility is an issue the bandstand could be made of glass.

The bandstand could double as an outdoor classroom if it was close to the library.

Plaza at Oak Park Ave. & Lake

The plaza at the southeastern entry still feels like it is from 1974. The plaza could be redesigned considering some of the ideas tossed around and the fountain could be relocated to its original location. It feels like a fish out of water now.

I think there's a range of creative people to showcase at the southeastern corner. I think the fountain could go back to its original location.

The plaza is heavily used as a bus stop. Maybe it isn't the appropriate location for an interpretive gesture.

General Comments

I've been living here for 20 years and have seen many different uses of the park, some good and some bad. I think the meadow is untouchable. I like to see families picnicking on the east side of the park in the summer and during festivals. The northeast corner always seems to be empty. I don't know if that's a bad thing. The peace memorial is used by skateboarders and many others. I remember climbing on the memorial and reading the names; it's a wonderful area.

The area in front of the library could become a better gathering space if it was more visible.

Maybe there's an opportunity for a water feature there.

Frank Lloyd Wright's son may be a good person to talk to. He worked on the restoration of Unity Temple and on Austin Gardens. He believed the park is a reflection of the entire community.

I observed people in the morning, mostly mothers with strollers or children, walking around the area west of the monument. In the middle of the day more people would gather around the playground and the hill. Later in the day, when school is let out, I would see a lot of teenagers gather around the slope and the area west of the monument.

You can only get security when you have some form of surveillance. We used to have police officers in all of the Chicago parks.

Visually, I think the park is a hodge-podge of different elements. It needs a unifying theme. It could be genius if it was successful. The ability to find the thread that connects everything in this park together will be essential.

If we add interpretive signage and other elements that really do the park's history right we may be able to change the psychology of some users and instill a new sense of pride. Some of the undesirables may leave the park alone.

I think I would be reactive versus proactive on the idea of the cameras.

We don't need a police officer. We just need a single certified person who surveys the park on a daily basis.

I do not think that the Park District can afford someone to spend all their day in the park and I doubt if the tax payers would wish to pay for it, unfortunately.