

3-24-1902

Letter to Caroline Hazard, Wellesley, MA, from Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., Brookline, MA

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.wellesley.edu/hazard_correspondence

Recommended Citation

Olmsted, Frederick Law Jr., "Letter to Caroline Hazard, Wellesley, MA, from Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., Brookline, MA" (1902).
Papers of Caroline Hazard: Correspondence. Paper 2.
http://repository.wellesley.edu/hazard_correspondence/2

This Letter is brought to you for free and open access by the Papers of Caroline Hazard at Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Papers of Caroline Hazard: Correspondence by an authorized administrator of Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. For more information, please contact ir@wellesley.edu.

**OLMSTED BROTHERS,
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS.**

BROOKLINE, MASS.

24th March, 1902.

Miss Caroline Hazard,

President of Wellesley College, Wellesley, Mass.

Dear Madam:-

I beg to offer the following somewhat fragmentary observations and suggestions as a result of my visit on the 11th March. I shall gladly hold myself open to correspondence upon the subject, and if you write me in regard to any points upon which I do not make myself clear I shall do my best to explain my views more fully. If possible I shall try to make another visit in the near future, not as a matter of business, but for my own satisfaction, for I must admit that the exceedingly intricate and complex topography and the peculiarly scattered arrangement of most of the buildings somewhat baffled me and that I came away with a less clear and comprehensive grasp of the whole situation than I could wish. If such a visit should lead to any changes in my ideas I shall of course indicate them to you.

Wellesley College has in its grounds a peculiar endowment, and with the endowment, it seems to me, a peculiar obligation to posterity. The endowment is the landscape beauty which often attaches to the type of glaciated topography there presented when it is

fortunately accentuated by the distribution of trees. It is a landscape not merely beautiful, but with a marked individual character not represented so far as I know on the ground of any other college in the country. The same type is to be found in a number of places in southeastern New England and on Long Island, but its character is so delicate, its scale is so small, that acre after acre it is being defaced and altered by man's occupation, until at last in its perfection it will be very rare indeed. In topography of a bolder, simpler sort man may build and cut and change a great deal without radically altering the character of the landscape, although he may weaken and injure it. Scratches which are unimportant surface markings on a colossal torso would absolutely destroy a delicate and intricate bas-relief. And so this type of landscape with its peculiar kind of intricate beauty and its immensely significant expression of geological history must under ordinary human occupancy be a vanishing type.

Am I not right in feeling that it is especially the duty of an institution of learning which is possessed of such an example to treasure it for future generations with the most sympathetic care for its scientific as well as for its aesthetic value?

For both these ends it is important to alter the surface in the fewest possible localities and to avoid so far as possible placing any constructions in such a way as to separate integral parts of any well marked topographic unit. Indiscriminate scattering of buildings over the whole tract is in every way undesirable and

the effort should be to concentrate the buildings and the roads and other constructions connected with them in a small number of compact groups. Fortunately this is also in accordance with the requirements of convenient administration.

All of the ground west of the big hill may be said roughly to lie in three kinds of shape: First, irregular plateaus of slightly undulating surface rounding over rapidly into steep sloping sides; Second, rounded ridges and hummocks usually less high than the plateaus and showing no flat space on top; Third, the moist, flat meadows between these hills. No buildings are appropriate upon the latter, because of their lowness and dampness. Even if these practical objections could be met without undue expense, the meadows would continue to look unsuitable and buildings upon them would appear to be out of place and to be pushed out into what should properly be left open, -- witness the Chemical Laboratory. The rounding ridges and hummocks are seldom if ever of large enough size to support more than one building each, and to use them would therefore lead to dispersion. Moreover, their forms round over so perfectly from side to side that buildings cannot be put upon them without obscuring the characteristic unity of the little hills.

The plateaus, however, are somewhat larger and are made up of two fairly distinct parts, the upper flat and the escarpment, so that a dividing line of construction which follows the edge of the flat simply recognizes a natural division and emphasizes it.

The main college building was erected upon one of the

Hazard - 4

most irregular of these little plateaus in a portion admirably chosen for a building of such size, so far as appearance goes, although without due regard to the points of compass. There remains unoccupied and available the western edge of the flat between the kitchen wing and the present superintendent's house and a little of the northern edge of the flat just east of his house. Opposite the centre of the main hall the northern edge of the flat is broken up into a more complex form and takes on a very interesting character which would be almost completely destroyed by a building of any size. It would be a pity to erect one there, but if it were to be done the treatment should aim to obliterate completely by artificial grading the little hollow on the west which detaches this piece of upland from the main plateau and to make the escarpment look like a continuous piece of glacial work.

As to possibilities of future growth here, then, I think that a building might be erected in the form of a wing to the main building, or a separate structure somewhat in the position of a wing, extending north from near the present kitchen wing and possibly returning slightly to the east along the edge near the superintendent's house. I do not think such an addition would improve upon the present appearance, but if intelligently designed it would not look ill when accomplished. If the present main hall is to remain substantially as it is, that is without the removal of the kitchen wing, there appears to be space for a building about 9000 to 13000 square feet in area. The library as proposed requires between 23000 and 24000. The building here would however

Hazard - 5

be ample for laboratory purposes.

For some years, as I understand, rooms formerly occupied by students upon the north side of the main building have been from time to time converted into class-rooms and laboratories, partly because the pressure for such rooms was more insistent than the need for housing the students in the college building, and partly because the rooms were undesirable as living-rooms, though having the sort of light wanted for laboratory purposes.

Beside the specific objection to these particular rooms, I understand that the conditions of life in great barracks such as the main building are not considered desirable for the students and further means of reducing the number subjected to them would be acceptable. It occurs to me therefore that it might perhaps be a wise policy not to erect a new and separate science building, but to convert to laboratory and class-room uses the whole north side of the main building. Its exposure is excellent for the purpose and bad for dwelling purposes, while a separate science hall, if erected on the site considered above, would have mainly the less desirable east and west exposure. Would it be possible by concentrating the biological, chemical, physical and other laboratories, with all the recitation and lecture rooms, except for music and the graphic arts, and all the administration offices and students' assembly rooms, to occupy the whole of the main building profitably, and to remove all bed-rooms from it; and if so would it be possible to remodel the buildings successfully to such ends? I do not know the facts of the case enough to say: I

can only offer the suggestion as one that may be worth looking into.

The removal of the kitchen which would follow such a change would increase the available space on the hill for a new building, possibly enough to permit the construction of a library, although of that I have much doubt. It would certainly permit a much more orderly and agreeable treatment of the westerly end of the main building and the slope below it, now defaced in a shameful way. The construction of a new power plant elsewhere, even if the kitchen is to remain, would permit a great improvement at this point. The principle in dealing with this and other service quarters should be to provide ample though compactly arranged spaces for all the real needs of the service, ignoring none of them, so that there shall be a properly appointed place for everything; and to enclose them all by a well marked barrier which shall serve not merely as a screen for what may be within, but as a limit beyond which the "back yard" aspect shall not be extended. Without such a well marked barrier, boxes, barrels, servants' washing and rubbishy articles of one sort and another are apt to be spread abroad aimlessly so as to set their stamp on a needlessly large and conspicuous area.

The second plateau which has been occupied is that of the dormitory group. The buildings have here also been placed, rightly, at the edge of the flat, but except for the front of the Art Building, the effect is not very good. This is because the shapes of the buildings, apart from their individual appearance, are not at all well adapted to the situation, are not such as to

Hazard - 7

emphasize their position along the extended edge of the declivity. They should be long and their length should follow the direction of the edge. This is done admirably by the front of the Art Building on the side toward the slope, but the rest of the structure rather contradicts this expression in respect to the flat around which the buildings ought to group!

The plan and position of Wilder Hall on the other hand fulfils this requirement excellently so far as concerns the plateau, although its form and treatment upon the side toward the slope is far from agreeable. Its great height on that side in proportion to its length and its uncompromisingly block-like form contradicts again the idea of extension along the edge. It might be greatly improved by a wing at either end somewhat lower than the main building and placed at a right angle so that the mass as a whole would seem to recognize the curve of the escarpment.

The style of Wilder Hall, while in itself dignified and agreeable, lending itself to convenient planning and economical construction, and to me very attractive through the pleasant associations which I have with it, appears to me under the circumstances very unfortunate. It has introduced into the college grounds still another distinct type of architecture to add to the existing confusion, and its large, simple, uncompromisingly formal and rectangular shape is quite out of harmony with the delicate intricacy of the topography, which, if it calls for anything, demands a somewhat intricate and complex architecture upon a

Hazard - 8

rather delicate scale.

Not only do the dormitories fail in their individual form to emphasize the edge of the plateau which they occupy, but their spacing is such that the edge does not readily connect them into a line enclosing the plateau. Four buildings of almost any shape ranged in a straight line along one side of a quadrangle, even at considerable distances, are grouped together unconsciously and the shape and order of the arrangement are agreeably apparent at a glance. But when they are placed in a rapidly curving line about a space of irregular form, the intervals between them must be less or must be bridged with some other indication of continuity if the eye is to make anything but chaos out of the group.

Looking upon all the buildings of the dormitory group except Wilder Hall and the Art Building as temporary, I am strongly of the opinion that for the sake of aesthetic effect and good administration alike, the future buildings should be built along the edge of the escarpment, following its curve with their length by various angles and breaks, and forming an almost continuous line with but narrow intervals or even in actual contact.

Such an arrangement would provide the maximum accommodation upon the hill, thereby reducing the deplorable tendency to scattering buildings through the grounds and providing that accommodation at an excellently central point; it would make an architectural composition in perfect conformity with the topographic conditions, and one having a very attractive character of its own. It is true

Hazard - 9

that the stern of the Art Building, if I may so call it, would project unfortunately into the close thus created, but I believe that if proper regard were paid to that building in fixing the position of those on either side this stern could be brought into line not unpleasantly.

But while such an arrangement would be perfectly feasible and would be the most convenient and most agreeable from every point of view if properly carried out, let me say frankly that its success would depend absolutely upon pursuing it with a far-sighted consistency of purpose at every step in its construction. The method of dealing with each building as an independent problem if applied to the development of this plateau must result in hopeless failure. In order to make the reason for this statement clear, at the risk of wearying you, I enclose an extract from a paper written apropos of the general plan of the City of Washington, but of direct application to your problem.

Before another foundation is laid upon that hill a determination should be reached as to the ultimate result to be looked forward to in respect to the shape of the space or spaces to be kept permanently open, as to the position and approximate bulk of the principal building-masses, as to the main lines of communication by road and path for the students and for service, and as to the style of architecture.

As to the latter, my own impression, subject to the advice of a competent architect, is that in the presence of the Art Building and Wilder Hall, it is probably necessary to adopt a

style confined to classic or so-called colonial detail, but there is no reason whatever why buildings should not be erected in this style sufficiently irregular and intricate in mass to conform with the scale of the topography and the irregular contour of the plateau which they would encircle. It is needless to refer to the erectheium as a type of classic building with which the portico of the Art Building would not be out of harmony, and yet which could be made to fit any irregularity of your glacial hills.

To reach such a determination and to express it in such form as would enable your successors to understand it and carry it to completion, is a matter of much difficulty. The first requisite is the close study of the problem by competent designers who shall look well to the future and conscientiously puzzle out the difficulties which may be caused by any present decision so as to assure a successful issue from them. Any one can move a pawn in chess, but it takes not only a skilful player but one who is willing to think out his problem laboriously, to avoid so moving the pawn as to block his future success.

Moreover, assuming the right guiding conception to have been formed, the difficulty arises how to express it. If the conditions under which future buildings are to be erected could be perfectly foreseen, the best way would unquestionably be to have complete and detailed plans prepared for the whole group and to proceed with their execution from time to time as occasion serves. But I fear that such plans would be found in part not perfectly adapted to the conditions of the future in case their completion

should be long delayed. They would in any case be an admirable expression of the conception and could be modified as need arose, but their cost would be so considerable in view of their probably having to be in large part re-designed, that I can hardly expect the College to authorize their preparation. On the other hand, it would be possible to prepare block plans fixing with sufficient definiteness the essential features of the arrangement with an indication of the architectural style by means of one or two perspectives showing the character of sky line to be formed by the masses and the typical treatment of the details. Such plans supplemented by a written discussion or programme, if conscientiously examined by any future designers would enable them, if they they were large-minded enough to wish it, to do each his own problem in such a way as to contribute toward a consistent general result.

If such an artistic charter, as it might be called, were to be supplemented by a permanent board of two or three professional advisors to the College, who should be helped to retain a broad and far-sighted viewpoint by being debarred from undertaking the design of individual buildings themselves, a means would be provided for maintaining that continuity of policy in the development of the physical aspect of the college which is so well recognized to be essential in its general administration.

Such a block plan as I have mentioned with a perspective sketch and an explanatory programme is largely an architectural matter, although calling for a very well-studied adjustment to the landscape, and I have therefore taken the liberty of consulting

Hazard - 12

with Mr. H. Langford Warren in regard to the difficulty of its preparation. I beg to report that he would, if you so desire, prepare it jointly with me for the sum of two hundred and fifty dollars.

Although in its detail quite different from what would be appropriate in connection with Wilder Hall, it may interest you to see the accompanying photographs of the Troy Orphan Asylum, designed by Mr. Warren for a site on the edge of a declivity somewhat suggestive of that at the dormitory group.

There is another available site in a somewhat central locality on the broad, flat, wooded hillock just west of the Chapel and Music Hall, with which a building on this site would form three sides of a quadrangle facing north upon the road. The lamentable discord of style, scale and color between the new Chapel and the older Music Hall, and the utter disregard of the latter shown in fixing the location and grade of the Chapel would render such a quadrangle but a harlequin affair, but at the worst it could hardly increase the present discord and it might in some measure give a semblance of order and purpose to the relative positions of the existing buildings. It is just conceivable that an ingenious and sympathetic architect, willing to make the best of a bad job, by ordering and drilling the lame and quarrelsome chorus instead of turning his back upon them and, as it were, executing a pas seul to suit his own fancy, might design an auditorium as an addition built into and across the north front of Music Hall in such a way as to present a facade less restless and petty than the

present and through a manipulation of the grades less out of relation with the Chapel: but I have doubts as to the practicability of this project and any separate building put down in front of the Music Hall seems to me out of the question.

The site to the west would accommodate a building of rectangular form, fairly balancing the Chapel, about 13000 square feet in extent, but if an irregular plan were adopted this building could be extended, with entirely agreeable results, to the south and west sufficiently to provide a total of 35000 square feet, more than sufficient for the requirements of the College Library, although I fear not arranged in quite the most convenient and compact manner.

Assuming that College Hall may be converted wholly to purposes of instruction and administration, it would seem as though no other buildings would have to be provided for in addition to those discussed above except a gymnasium, a power house and perhaps additional dormitories. There remain two plateau regions as yet unoccupied. One lies on the northerly and westerly sides of the wide, wet pocket north of College Hall. The other lies between Simpson Hall and the observatory. The latter is very irregular and broken and the best part of it, I am told, is rendered unavailable for buildings by the objection to placing illuminated windows near the observatory. The former is for the most part unpleasantly exposed to the road and railroad and the means of access to it by the ridge near the ice house is not very direct. With the little

time I had to study the problem I do not feel able to advise positively as to the relative advantages of these two regions for future building developments, but I am inclined to favor that to the northwest because of its greater extent of suitable building land and because it is nearer to College Hill. I am very positive that it would be no more than a wise precaution, in view of its possible future use, to set out at once along its northern edge a narrow but comparatively dense plantation of mixed deciduous and evergreen trees with an undergrowth of bushes, in order to establish a screen against the highway and the railroad.

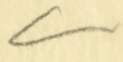
As to the gymnasium, it should be near a proper playing field, and the latter, unless I am mistaken, must be upon high ground, for any of the low meadows, however delightful to look upon and at certain seasons to use, cannot be so drained as to serve for playfields in the late autumn or the spring, and when they are dry in summer the students are not at hand to use them. I should be inclined therefore to place the gymnasium on the high land across the valley northwest of College Hall.

While speaking of the valley I cannot forbear calling attention to the ruthless way in which its sides have been hacked and its character damaged in providing the sewage disposal beds, a butcherly and, I think, unnecessary mutilation of characteristic and beautiful geologic forms. I think it would have been possible at a moderate increase in the cost of the work, assuming that it had to be done, to do it at least in such a way as to simulate the natural

forms resulting from glacial action and to restore the new-cut banks as far as possible to harmony with their surroundings.

The site contemplated for the power house near the present ice house does not strike me favorably from a landscape point of view, but I must confess that I have been unable to think of any place to which there were not greater objections.

To the matter of the approach I have not given the examination which it deserves, but two solutions of present difficulty appear worth considering. The first is, in effect, that proposed by Miss Brown to enter the corner of Blossom Street and Central Avenue on the present side drive, to deflect from that to the right so as to descend along the northerly side of the little valley north of Simpson Cottage, and thence to follow the little ridges which lead across to the edge of the meadow south of Wilder Hall, swinging into the main drive near the Rhododendrons. This route would be pleasant, reasonably direct from Central Avenue, and would not be costly except in proportion to its considerable length. By following the little ridges between Simpson Cottage and Wilder Hall it would avoid cutting directly across the meadow itself which is objectionable from an aesthetic as well as from an engineering point of view. The second is to improve the old approach by making it more direct and convenient at a few points, as could readily ^bve done, and to abandon the service road which has become the customary entrance, replacing it for service purposes by a road leading over the ridge by the ice house and thence more directly out to the street

than the present road but at a point further from the station. It would then be a distinctly longer route from the station than that by the main entrance and in so far as its use for carriages still continued it would be more agreeable than the present service road. It would serve in future for the development of the plateau next to Central Avenue and would help to link it to the rest of the grounds, and it would permit the obliteration of the causeway of the present road which cuts the meadow in an ugly fashion. The direct foot path across this meadow is a convenience so considerable that it cannot be dispensed with and I do not see how it can be altered in position without lessening its convenience, but the row of maple trees which has been planted along its line is sure to form, when grown, a division line completely out of harmony with the landscape in which they are growing. I strongly advise their removal in spite of the pleasant shade which they would in time afford along the path. 

Of the many suggestions which I might make in regard to matters of detail in the treatment of the grounds, I will confine myself to three. In the first place, some better kind of foot path should be adopted than any of the several now in use. Doubtless the most convenient and least costly to maintain is the concrete such as borders the drive from College Hall to the foot of the hill. Its color and texture are, however, very ugly and out of place in such surroundings. If concrete is to be used, the finishing

layer should be made with a body of clean, fine-screened, beach pebbles from the size of a pea to that of a lima bean and when the cement has nearly set it should be brushed hard with a stiff wire broom to clean off the smeary mortar and show the grain of the pebbles. This will give a good texture and if the pebbles are of the right sort a good color to the path. In the second place, a complete and adequate system of underground surface water drains should be planned out and gradually installed with a sufficient number of drain inlets to take off the rain-water promptly from paths, roads, yards, lawns and other surfaces without danger of washouts and long-standing puddles. Such a system is costly, taken as a whole, because to do its work properly the pipes have to be large and the inlets and catch basins numerous, but those who have to pick their way around or across mud-puddles and areas of slush through a not inconsiderable portion of the academic year will be able to appreciate the civilized and civilizing effect of having the surface water always promptly take care of itself without inconvenience and without damage. In the third place it is immensely to be desired that when the new power house is provided for, or even in anticipation of its coming, the electric wires be placed underground and the poles removed. They are in places a very serious defacement of the grounds.

In closing I must again express my regret that I was not able to make a more thorough study of the grounds and more definite and directly useful recommendations, and urge upon you the serious

consideration of creating as a permanent part of the College organization a small board of professional advisers, to whom should be referred for advice and recommendation all matters affecting the outward physical aspect of the College. Such a board, changing its membership gradually by means of over-lapping terms of office, *debarred* from doing any important active designing itself, would do a great deal to preserve continuity of policy in such matters and to avoid errors due, on the one hand, to short sightedness on the part of professional advisers called in for the nonce to deal with single problems, and on the other, to lack of professional training in such matters on the part of the permanent officers of the College. Such a board would aid in the choice of architects, for example, or in drawing up the terms or programme of a competition if one were required and in awarding the competition; it would examine and advise upon any plans for alterations or improvements in the buildings or grounds; it would make visits of inspection at rare intervals and offer suggestions; and it would in general be open to consultation on any matter relating to the design of the buildings and grounds. I think that the duties of such a board would not in the long run be very arduous if reasonable discretion were used in referring matters of detail to it, and that, if provision were made for additional compensation in case of special investigations requiring a number of visits or much study, an able board could be secured for a very moderate annual retainer. Of course, Wellesley

Hazard - 19

would labor under a disadvantage as compared with a men's college in that it would always be harder to find among the public-spirited alumnae professional advisers of the requisite skill and experience, but, college affiliations aside, I am sure that many architects and landscape architects of standing and ability would render such services to a college, as a part of their duty to the community, for a rate of compensation which would not attract them to other work.

Respectfully submitted,

Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.