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

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.

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OLMSTED BROTHERS,
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS.

BROOKLINE, MASS.

13th November, 1902.

Miss Caroline Hazard,
President Wellesley College,
Wellesley, Mass.

Dear Madam:--

We beg to submit the accompanying outline plan and the following preliminary report concerning the placing of buildings in the dormitory group:

We need not rehearse the reasons in favor of the complete utilization of the hill for compactly arranged dormitories. These were sufficiently touched upon in Mr. Olmsted's report of 24th March, 1902. It is necessary only to recall that the situation and the form of the hill call for such a grouping as will express its plateau character; and open flat space falling away at its irregular margin by an abrupt declivity, it demands a series of buildings

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which shall occupy the crest of this declivity and follow its outline, like a group joining hands to form a ring about the open grove upon which all face.

Besides these general considerations there are certain fixed data; the positions of the two permanent structures, Wilder Hall and the Art Building, the general position of the main approach from the direction of College Hall and the necessity of providing for approach to the service quarters of the dormitories in a convenient and inconspicuous way. -- Wilder Hall, lying tangent to the circuit of the hill with its basement pushed out over the crest and reached by a service road at a lower level than the plateau, is typical of the sort of position to be sought, although the outer side of the building is treated too much like an unimportant back, whereas if considered in relation to the main drive or to the grounds at large, it is the most generally conspicuous side. In the case of the Art Building the reverse has been done, for the greater importance of the outer side has been so strongly recognized that sight was lost of the relation of the building to its future

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neighbors and to the area upon which they must face in common if they are to have the desirable neighborly quality expressive of the social unity of their occupation.

The wooden cottages, so called, are very suitably placed along the crest of the hill, but the direction of their length is such as to interrupt and contradict rather than to emphasize the circuit which they mark and their orientation is not such as to express at all strongly any common interest. They are a little like independent and self-centered students seated glumly facing hither and yon in a reading room, instead of a party of friends gathered about the hearth or the table. We have assumed that ultimately all these unsubstantial and inflammable houses will give way to more permanent buildings and have made no attempt to force the permanent plan to fit these temporary occupants.

On account of the size and importance of the Art Building we have assumed its main axis as one of the guiding lines of the group, placing at its further end a large dormitory consisting of a central mass with two wings following the crest of the hill and tending to embrace the central area. To the North is placed another building with its facade balancing that of

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Wilder Hall about the axis and, with the latter, completing a sort of horseshoe. To strengthen still further the unity of the group and to afford shelter and connection between the buildings, a colonnade or cloister is suggested in the two intervals. To take advantage of the irregular enlargement of the hill, the building on the north is provided with receding wings, which do not, however, project so far as to interrupt the general continuity of the outer side of the group.

The occupation of the space between Wilder Hall and the Art Building is a difficult problem in many ways. A building to stand here must carry the sweep of the hill crest around an acute angle; it must recognize and mark the out-reaching spur, and it must, so far as possible, avoid an appearance of being pocketed between its neighbors and cut off from intimate relationship with the central open space. Then, too, its architectural style must be more carefully handled to form a harmonious transition between the Art Building on its left and the brick and wooden colonial Wilder Hall upon its right. Our sketch shows a building of somewhat irregular plan which we believe could be made to serve these ends successfully. It is linked with Wilder Hall by a

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platform with or without a colonnade. Between it and the Art Building is a sort of entrance court to the plateau.

At the northwestern corner of the hill the problem was different, for there runs out the flat spur now occupied by Norumbega Cottage. Leaving next to the Art Building an entrance court like that on the South, (in this case the main entrance to the plateau) we have placed an H shaped dormitory which forms, with one wing of the dormitory opposite Wilder Hall, a sort of side quadrangle opening off the central area. This quadrangle is of quite sufficient size, opening as it does to the South, to avoid the objections which sometimes arise against the erection of buildings around small courts. The north side of this quadrangle is occupied by a rather small building at the crest of the projecting spur at a sufficient distance from the other buildings for plenty of light and air, but connected firmly with them by cloisters.

The main approach to the hill is simply an improvement of the existing road, changing its location in such a way as to lessen the grade and lead conveniently up to the main facade of the Art Building and to the two entrances which pass through on either side of it. The service approach to all of

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the buildings is at the basement level outside, and enclosed yards are shown in order to maintain a more orderly appearance from that side. Their walls will help also in the general views of the hill to supplement the effect of the connecting cloisters at the upper level and to knit the group together in a picturesque manner.

Like these much needed service yards, the cloisters are not merely for aesthetic effects, but will serve a very valuable purpose in providing a passage between the dormitories free from rain and snow. Such connections have been found a very decided convenience in schools where they have been used, as at St Mark's. They would be open colonnades which would be no means block the outlook from the hill between the buildings, but if desired could be provided with movable storm sash for the outer side to afford a better wind break in winter.

We do not submit with this report a perspective sketch suggestive of the architectural treatment of the buildings as a whole because such a sketch would have to be based upon assumption as to many facts of interior arrangement (and since Messrs. Heins & Lafarge have been engaged to design one of the buildings it is better to wait for them to study out these arrangements in detail than to have us assume

have not been engaged C. H.

them in advance of that study. We shall be very glad, however, to consult with Messrs. Heins & Lafarge, and in the light of their detailed studies determine upon certain controlling considerations of design that will, if consistently regarded hereafter, maintain a harmonious quality throughout the group.

Generally in regard to the architectural style it may be said that it should harmonize with the somewhat unusual character of the natural formation which is itself small and intricate in detail and without the severity of long and sweeping lines, but affords much variety and irregularity in its profiles. Besides this harmony with natural surroundings there should also be harmony with the existing buildings, which, without repeating those of their qualities that seem out of keeping with the natural topography, would at once show their close relationship as members of one family circle. For this reason the material of all the buildings should be waterstruck brick laid with careful consideration for color and texture and with varying amounts of limestone trim.

The character of the buildings is distinctly domestic rather than monumental and it is of the greatest importance that this character should be reserved throughout.

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It is our opinion in consideration of these points that the situation demands buildings comparatively small in the scale of their details for the sake of the domestic character thereby produced, with much variety of outline and freedom of detail and yet with a careful adherence to classic forms echoing those of the two existing buildings. This we believe may be best accomplished by a skillful handling of the style of the early Renaissance in England, when while classic detail had superseded the Gothic, the masses still remained more or less broken and picturesque.

omit

The use of limestone and water struck brick
aid with careful consideration for texture and color,
of a character and of a scale as small as that of the
English work above mentioned and a broken and picturesque
character of roofs seem to be the essential architec-
tural necessities of the problem.

Yours respectfully,

Charles Brooks
Warren, Smith & Bischoff
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