



SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

The Dunn Garden

An Olmsted Brothers Country Place Estate



The 1916 Olmsted Brothers master plan by James Dawson retained and enhanced many of the Dunn Gardens site's natural features, including its large stands of second-growth Douglas Firs and its sweeping views of Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains. The major current threat is to the forest, the primary feature lending historic integrity to the site, which is in decline due to age. The removal of trees in the neighborhood, and subsequent exposure to the elements endanger both the forest and the spatial character of the property. Along with public awareness, the property requires funding for a computer-based landscape preservation study and a master planting plan for the forest as well as funds for further rehabilitation of the gardens. Consistent with its mission, the Dunn Gardens Trust also would like to reacquire portions of the original acreage and to develop a children's learning garden and an outreach center for groups working to preserve significant Northwest gardens.

HISTORY

In 1914, Arthur and Jeannette Dunn purchased ten acres of undeveloped land in what is now the Broadview neighborhood of Seattle, half of a rural parcel owned by John and Florence Agen, friends of the family. The gently sloping property was extensively wooded; however, it offered ample open space for garden development as well as commanding views of Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains to the west. In May 1915, the Dunns and Agens approached the Olmsted Brothers, the



renowned landscape design firm of Brookline, Massachusetts, to locate two dwellings and to prepare a contiguous landscape plan for what would become their families' "country places."

True to the Olmsted's design philosophy, James Dawson, head of their West Coast office, prepared a master plan that retained and enhanced the site's natural features. The plan took advantage of the western slope for extraordinary vistas, a ravine along the southern edge of the Dunn property, and large stands of second-growth Douglas Firs with open spaces interspersed. The Dunn's summer house was sited above a great lawn in order to take in the sound and mountain views, while spaces were cleared and leveled for croquet and tennis courts, a vegetable garden, and a garage.

In the spring of 1916 the Olmsted Brothers delivered a planting plan and plant list, which preserved many of the existing Fir trees and native understory plants. The plan included informal groups of flowering shrubs and large drifts of bulbs. At the request of Arthur Dunn (who, himself, was a transplanted "upstate" New Yorker), many deciduous trees were added, creating diversity of texture and color. Arthur Dunn implemented the design himself through periodic site visits and correspondence with Dawson. Dunn also made changes to the master plan to accommodate local conditions; however these changes respected the spatial character of the Olmsted plan. A low-lying, gray-shingled summer house (by the Seattle architectural firm of Bebb and Gould) was built on the site in 1915. Dunn was a keen and knowledgeable gardener and took considerable pride in his garden. Thus the Dunn family loved and enjoyed their landscape, retreating to it each summer until Arthur Dunn's death in 1945.

In the following years, the Dunn half of the Dunn/Agen landscape was subdivided into four lots for Dunn's surviving children. The original summer house, unsuitable for year-round use, was demolished, and three permanent houses were built within the gardens. Fortunately, all are similar in scale to the summer house: one is sited to the side of the great lawn, another is near the original house and the third is based on the original garage, thus maintaining the essential spatial character of the Olmsted plan. Other changes included a small Japanese garden installed within the plan by notable Seattle landscape designer Fujitaro Kubota in 1964, the Nobel Hoggson perennial border, and the eastern expansion of the garden that extends beyond the Olmsted plan by Arthur's son, Edward B. Dunn, a nationally recognized plantsman who (appropriately) followed the natural planting principles of William Robinson. This woodland garden contains Edward's collection of understory native plants and samples of his extensive and well-known collection of native and hybridized rhododendrons.

Today, despite changes to the grounds and vistas and the removal of the original summer house, the Olmsted landscape structure -- a great lawn in the midst of a mature forest with curvilinear circulation paths and extensive understory borders -- remains essentially intact. Most importantly, although three dwellings were built, the garden itself was not visually subdivided with fences or hedgerows. Internal vistas and the spatial arrangement of the native and planted trees strongly define the gardens to this day. The characteristic curvilinear drive and footpaths remain. The meandering edge of the Great Lawn follows the Olmsted plan and the deciduous trees planted by Arthur Dunn still provide visual contrast throughout the forest. Although the views to Puget Sound and the mountains were obscured in the 1930s as the neighborhood forest matured, views opened up again as Douglas Firs were removed for new residential construction to the west in the 1990s.

The E.B. Dunn Historic Gardens Trust was formed in 1991 to oversee the conservation easement on the property as well as its transition to a garden for public enjoyment. The Trust Board members include caring and knowledgeable regional experts, including nationally recognized curators. The garden conservation committee has prepared major segments of a Cultural Landscape Report, including treatment and development plans to guide conservation of the gardens. The committee has documented the Olmsted planting plan and plant list, as well as E.B. Dunn's plant palette, and presently is preparing an inventory of the Dunn family archives. A model docent program provides public enjoyment and learning in the gardens. The endowment is small, and the annual operations budget, including garden conservation and maintenance, is only \$150,000. Surviving Dunn family members, some of whom continue to live on the site, are active in board efforts and permit tours of



the property, as they understand its historic value and welcome public enjoyment of the gardens. Due to the efforts of the Trust and the Dunn family, the Dunn Gardens is among the few Olmsted-designed Country Place estates extant and open for public view and enjoyment. Northwest garden societies and educational institutions teaching garden design, history of landscape gardens, and historic preservation consider the Dunn Gardens as a valuable resource.

The Dunn Gardens was listed on the National Register of Historic Properties, with local importance, in 1991. Based on research conducted by members of the garden conservation committee, a case is being prepared for regional or national importance. The listing was initially granted based on the relatively intact quality of the original Olmsted landscape plan from 1916 and its implementation by Arthur Dunn during his lifetime through 1945. Also significant in this historic landscape are the Edward Dunn woodland garden and plant collections, the Noel Hoggson-designed perennial border, and Fujitaro Kubota's Japanese garden.

THE THREAT

The Dunn Gardens faces three primary threats to its integrity: subdivision, off-site forest removal, and the loss of trees (on- and off-site) due to age. Combined, these three factors could alter both the site's spatial character and its on-site microclimate.

Subdivision

Like many country place estates across the country, the Dunn Gardens has been altered -- and will continue to be threatened -- by land subdivision. The eastern quarter of the combined 20-acre parcel was subdivided in the 1950s: while not part of the Olmsted planting plan, it was intended to provide a native forest transition from the city to the countryside. The remaining Dunn property was subdivided among the Dunn siblings. The Agen half of the remaining site was further subdivided into several residential parcels in the 1960s. The Agen house and service structures are now separated by newer residences, fragmenting what remained of the Olmsted plan. As this nomination is being written, the Trust board is working with the owners of one of these parcels to prevent its further subdivision.

Two years ago, upon the death of Dorothy Bayley, the last of Arthur Dunn's children, her house was sold outside of the family. The Trust had long-range aspirations for a visitor/education facility, a suitable use for this structure. Unfortunately, neither family nor Trust funds were available to buy it. Fortunately, again, sellers and buyers agreed to a strict development envelop that limits the visual impact of potential house alterations on the historic integrity of the overall site. Working with buyers who enthusiastically support the garden's mission, the Trust continues to direct rehabilitation and maintenance of that portion of the site suitably for public tours. As the Trust endowment is modest, the foreseeable need for future property sales poses a definite threat to the garden.

Declining neighborhood forest

The tendency of owners of smaller neighboring lots to remove mature trees - either through fear of damage from falling trees or to clear sites for the construction of larger houses - threatens the neighborhood forest. Eventually the extant trees within the Dunn Gardens will be an island forest, ever more vulnerable to exposure and wind damage.

Nature itself

The third threat is the result of the natural growth patterns of the Dunn Gardens forest itself. The native Douglas Firs are reaching mature heights above 150 feet. The Eastern hardwoods are nearing a century in age; in the milder Northwest climate, they also have reached extraordinary size and are prey the weaknesses associated with such growth. Many of these trees will die within the next few decades.



HOW TO HELP

The E.B. Dunn Historic Garden Trust would like the public to help in its efforts to

- Maintain the integrity of the extant neighborhood forest. Funding for a neighborhood awareness and education campaign is needed. Many neighboring residents enjoy the gardens as members of the Foundation; however, many remain unaware of the threats to the forests and their potential role in its preservation.
- Raise the significance of the garden on the National Trust register in order to accurately recognize its historic importance, and to increase its eligibility for conservation support.
- Funding is also needed to complete a full Cultural Landscape Report including review and organization of the photographic archive, documentation of rehabilitation projects, completion of the historic plant inventory report, and a more detailed review of the landscape's evolution over time. This will enable the completion of a strategic plan with prioritized projects to guide fund raising for garden conservation.
- Support on-going research regarding the gardens. For example, to address the looming tree crisis, the Trust needs a computer-assisted simulation of the changes to the three-dimensional visual structure of the gardens as they evolved between 1916 and the present. There are at least four important periods to reproduce: Arthur Dunn's implementation of the Olmsted plan and its appearance at mid-century, the Edward B. Dunn expansion and management of the original Olmsted plan, the exemplary rehabilitation work since the site was listed on the National Register in 1991, and future projections of its appearance with the deterioration of the forest. Approximately \$30,000 is needed for a graduate assistantship and computer equipment to support a student interested in computer-based historic preservation to accomplish this research. The information from the project would provide the basis for a vegetation management plan to protect and guide the replanting of the forest, consistent with the Olmsted plan, for the foreseeable future.
- Support the redevelopment of one of the three dwellings as a public outreach center. The Northwest Garden Archive would gather the horticultural records of several historic gardens in the region in a location accessible to the public and scholars within the Dunn Gardens or, as is being explored, at the Center for Urban Horticulture on the University of Washington campus.
- Support for the reacquisition of portions of the garden previously sold, both from the Dunn Garden estate and the companion Agen parcel.
- And, consistent with the Trust mission, assist other garden conservation projects such as is being accomplished with the nearby Kruckeberg Gardens.

Website

www.DunnGardens.org

Site Address

Dunn Gardens
P.O. Box 77126
Seattle, WA 98177
tel. 206-362-0933