

Testimony of Anne Sellin, Preservation Expert Witness  
Zoning Commission Case 13-14 McMillan PUD  
May 1, 2014

McMillan Park Reservoir is a key element in the McMillan Park Plan of 1902. Along with the mall and the Circle of Civil War Forts, McMillan was designated a Federal Park by Congress in 1911. and is a major piece of its park system, an outgrowth of the City Beautiful Movement. Mostly intact, McMillan Park is unique in the country for its size and its combined use as an engineering site to cleanse water for Washington and as a park open to the community. Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and opened in 1905, it is a feature that should be returned in full to the people.

The McMillan Commissioners Daniel Burnham, Charles McKim, Augustus St. Gaudens, and Frederick Olmsted Jr. saw that reinforcing existing open spaces beyond the L'Enfant City in the area atop the topographic bowl would preserve stretches of green space and serve as a mechanism toward this goal. McMillan Park was planned as an essential component of this plan. Keenly aware that the city was swiftly developing housing subdivisions northward, the Commissioners foresaw that a long range plan was crucial in order to preserve open space and to permit breezes to blow into the hot city bowl during the summer. By knitting together a series of open spaces, and by acquiring certain estates an Emerald Necklace would be formed winding through the higher portions of Washington City from Rock Creek Park to the Anacostia. In this area the knitting together public and private spaces, that is, cemeteries, the Soldiers Home, McMillan Park, and university campuses would link up to form flowing greenswards. Serving as gills to the city they would be used for recreation, walks and viewpoints to city monuments.

Over the years many of these green spaces have been either closed to the public or built over. The southern portion of the Soldiers Home where residents still remember visiting the dairy farm there at its south side have seen that big slice taken over by the Hospital Center buildings and parking lots, its western portion by the Veterans Hospital. Once open to the public, the Soldiers Home is open now only by appointment for group tours to the Lincoln Cottage but its campus is not open. A western portion of Glenwood Cemetery to the east was sold off and condominiums built there. McMillan was fenced off at the time of WW II and has remained so until now. Its larger western half where water has been purified chemically since 1987 is owned by the Corps of Engineers and will never be opened as a park again. Thus ironically, the neighborhood surround and Ward Five particularly have access the less park land than any other ward in the city.

The 25 acre east side is traversed by two east- west courts which contain 10 towers constructed to house washed sand used for filtering, and 4 regulator houses, all designed by water engineer Allen Hazen. These serve as functioning elements for the core of the

site, the 20 slow sand filtration compartments or “cells,” approximately an acre each. Covered by turf, they are a series of concrete groin vaults, supported by concrete piers fourteen feet apart, with a round oculus at the summit of each vault. These vaults give a stunning impression, illuminated by shafts of light pouring from the open oculi. The vaults appear to go on endlessly. The sand towers, as viewed from Michigan Ave., First St. and North Capitol St., look medieval and are particularly striking. Some are clad in ivy which turns crimson in the fall. Most of the site is given to the compartments of groin vaults which are entered through huge handsome wooden doors which open through the bermed walls lining the courtyards.

The project envisions destroying all the “cells” or compartments but three, of which one must be used at the north east by the city's water department to collect water as a measure to prevent flooding in Bloomingdale and Ledroit Park. The DC water system has already destroyed two vaults compartments in order to construct a deep sewer tunnel at the southwest corner of the site.

For parcels 4 and 5 demolition even includes cells 16, 17, and 19 which the applicants' own structural engineer Robert Sillman finds to be in the best condition. The developers are not concerned about working with reusable cells, as is called for in the Comprehensive Plan, but with the destruction of all the vaults on the site save the two at the NE corner being developed by the water department for catch basin for run off water.

The Vision McMillan Partners propose to destroy all the rest of the compartments of groin vaulting, the spectacular heart of the system. The claim that this ravaging of the largest number of historic features on the site constitutes an amenity under PUD zoning regulations PUD rule 2403.9D is absurd. The destruction of 80% of a park designed by the most eminent park designer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., and the towering water engineer Allen Hazen, completely contravenes the DC Historic Protection Act.

The developers' proposal to build a swimming pool and community structure is commendable but it would be billed to us taxpayers and privatized. The entire site, including all the southern park area, would be private and a whopping portion of what is now open space displaced by buildings. This hardly mitigates the carnage this building campaign would visit to the site, particularly since there is no need whatever to destroy most of the cells and vaulting where open land is proposed. Once gone, these unique and magnificent structures can never be replaced. All the open space and cells destroyed for private buildings and would be forever lost.

The city could appropriately spend that money to restore the entire park for the benefit of the public with no destruction of its historic elements. The vaults in worst condition could be filled in. Again, this an area least served by park land. There has been no

attention to Policy MC 2.6.2 regarding historic preservation at McMillan that adaptive reuse of some of the underground “cells” be a component of the site planning to preserve part of the historic record. One or two cells are being kept as catch basins and retained by the city for that use. Eight cells are stable except for their edges and three more are stable, according to the developers' engineer.

The Comprehensive Plan, under Parks, Recreation and Open Space makes clear the continued need for more open space. Action PROS 1.3.A states “Develop limits on lot coverage and impervious surface coverage in this zone that recognize and protect the basic value of parkland as open space. The zoning provisions should ensure that any future construction within parks is limited to park related uses and facilities.” Medical offices, retail stores and housing do not fulfill this requirement.

The following Policy PROS 1.4.4 states “Acquire and convert abandoned or tax delinquent land not in productive use into recreational use where feasible and appropriate, particularly in parts of the city that lack adequate access to parkland” This lends strong support to the retention of the entire park in this part of the city deficient in park land.

There is nothing in this proposal in the way of amenities. A so called “community center” which would be private and a swimming pool which will be private, all financed by the public purse are hardly amenities. Also we taxpayers are being asked to finance the “pad” for high office buildings. I see no amenities in this plan, a plan that demands a huge public subsidy that would destroy a park unique in the country and worthy of sensitive planning and public ownership.

The entire site was planned by Olmsted to be open to the public, not just what is now the federal side. When I prepared the historic designation some twenty years ago, I interviewed a number of people who had used the park before it was closed off in WW II. I especially remember what Rolland Brown who grew up in LeDroit Park told me. He said as a boy he frequently played baseball on the north west corner on the east of First St., a place the boys called the “fewer sewers.” He even remembered one boy falling through an open man hole; the boy stood up unhurt and scampered through the vaults and out the court door to return to the game. Dick Hurlburt who grew up near the park described playing on that side also. Olmsted intended all of McMillan to be used as park. It is sad that not even the beautiful three maidens bronze fountain by Herbert Adams would be installed on the site.

To quote Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.: ***“A thing which many people have held to be of great and peculiar beauty and which cannot be replaced, even if the predominant men of the day fail to appreciate its beauty or are inclined to think its beauty would be increased by 'improvements', ought not to be destroyed or radically altered...”***