



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION for
OLMSTED
PARKS

“... advances Olmsted’s principles and legacy of irreplaceable parks and landscapes that revitalize communities and enrich people’s lives.”

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June 2, 2016

Ravine Bridge Working Group
Lake Park
Milwaukee, WI

On behalf of the National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP), we are writing to express our organization’s concern about possible demolition of the historic concrete arch pedestrian bridge spanning the east ravine in Lake Park, Milwaukee. This bridge is a significant contributing feature to both local and National Register historic districts and an essential element of Frederick Law Olmsted’s plan for the park. Although said to be severely deteriorated, this iconic structure must be retained, and replaced in kind only if it is deemed impossible to restore after a detailed professional evaluation.

To our knowledge, the degree of deterioration, feasibility, means and cost to repair, and anticipated additional lifespan have not been studied in sufficient depth to determine the fate of this important structure. Therefore any decision about the bridge’s future is premature. We urge that a determination be delayed until requisite professional evaluation has been completed. In any case, replacement with a structure of modern design is incompatible with the bridge’s protected historic status. We were disturbed to learn that only new design options have been prepared for consideration. Destruction of historic fabric must be a last resort, not the consequence of expediency or predisposition of those empowered to make this irrevocable decision on behalf of Milwaukee’s citizens.

Established in 1980, the National Association for Olmsted Parks advances Olmsted principles and the legacy of irreplaceable parks and landscapes that revitalize communities and enrich people’s lives. It is the only national organization solely dedicated to preserving the Olmsted legacy by providing advocacy, research and outreach needed to protect, restore and maintain these exemplary parks and landscapes, particularly in urban areas.

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NAOP's interest in this particular Lake Park bridge relates to its role in fulfilling and preserving the park's outstanding Olmsted design legacy. Milwaukee's park system and three individual parks were among the last commissions completed by Frederick Law Olmsted, capping his legendary professional career as father of American landscape architecture and inventor of the public urban park.

Concerning Milwaukee parks eminent Olmsted scholar Charles Beveridge has observed, "Simplicity of treatment with concentration on grading of the land and providing circulation systems was the Olmsted firm's principal focus."

Beginning with his 1892 Preliminary Plan for Lake Park, Olmsted developed scenic routes along the bluffs above Lake Michigan with bridges spanning the site's deep ravines. This scheme provided visitors with an experience of continuous movement through the landscape, taking advantage of its inherent variety and beauty. This design epitomizes Olmsted's goal that a park "provided access to its scenic beauty" and shaped "spaces that gave this impression of greatly extended 'range'" by capturing "borrowed" scenery. "He envisioned that urban parks "act as a 'specific antidote' to the tension created by the urban environment. All his careful designing of the park was aimed at counteracting what we now call stress. To this end, Olmsted subordinated all elements of the park to this restorative purpose. The arrangement of trees, the grading of the land, and the flow of walks and drives, all were planned for the psychological effect they would have."

The concrete arch bridge makes Olmsted's intended sequence of unimpeded pedestrian movement through the park possible. While not Olmsted designed in particular, this bridge very much completes his plan and is historically significant in its own right as an early example of reinforced concrete design. Bridges by their nature are exposed to the elements, yet can survive for centuries with proper maintenance or restoration. Other municipalities have completed successful restorations in Olmsted-designed parks, including many of Central Park's 80-plus bridges in New York that are far older than Milwaukee's.

Federal funding likely is available to restore this bridge, which was in fact recently tapped to restore Lake Park's Lion Bridges. Conversely, funding for new construction is extremely scarce and project cost undoubtedly higher than repair. On fiscal grounds alone, restoration makes sense. If the existing bridge is demolished, the prime pedestrian artery of the park will be lost with no assurances of timely replacement. This scenario could precipitate the unraveling of the "opportunity to experience communal activities on common ground...a significant purpose of the public park."

Lake Park's concrete arch bridge may be a single structure in a local park, but its significance extends to preserving the functionality of one of Frederick Law Olmsted's last, most lovely and intact urban parks. We consider it shortsighted to eliminate a well-used community asset that has been providing a public service for so many years and could continue to do so for decades to come. NAOP urges Milwaukee County officials to commit to restoration not destruction. This path will best serve the park's thousands of visitors, demonstrate fiscal prudence, and honor historic preservation values. Thank you for giving our perspective timely consideration.

Sincerely,



Ethan Carr
NAOP Co-Chair



Patrice Kish
NAOP Co-Chair