Rainier Vista Concept Plan

University of Washington | Seattle, WA

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   Upper Vista
   Sciences Quadrangle
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   Infrastructure
   Acknowledgements & References

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What is the Rainier Vista?
The Past, Present and Future of the University of Washington’s Iconic Landscape

Although all universities have landscapes that are highly treasured by students and alumni alike, very few institutions are blessed with anything like the Rainier Vista. The development of a Concept Plan for this landscape starts with the recognition that this is a nationally important historic landscape whose greatest strength is that it has managed to preserve its core identity while continuing to evolve in exciting and meaningful ways. The mixture of mighty evergreens and campus buildings that frame its open center creates a uniquely sublime connection between the rarified world of higher education and the rawness of the distant wilderness. More than just another view to Mt. Rainier, the experience of the Vista’s signature moment lifts the spirit and humbles the soul simultaneously.

Beyond its emotive power, however, the Rainier Vista is also a multifaceted space that by virtue of its vast territory is able to absorb numerous functions, uses, identities, and scales. To begin with, it is the beloved centerpiece of the oldest educational institution on the west coast (the UW was founded in 1861 with development of its current site beginning in 1894). Once a dense forested hillside, the site that became the Rainier Vista was initially cleared for the UW by the organizers of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition (AYPE) in 1909. After a fleeting moment as a magnificent Beaux Arts fairground, the Vista, along with the Arts Quad, became the frame around which the university was constructed.

From a contemporary standpoint, the Rainier Vista is an active landscape space, particularly the portion between Drumheller Fountain and Red Square, and the iconic image of the University for faculty, students, staff, and alumni. Given the strong site lines up into the campus from the Montlake Intersection, it is also the public face the UW presents to the larger community. This symbolic function makes the Vista an ideal vehicle for communicating the University’s values and mission to the many communities within and beyond the campus. For instance, how is the UW’s commitment to sustainability supported by the resource-hungry 5 feet deep and 20,000 square foot Frosh Pond? Balancing the competing concerns of historic continuity and contemporary resource management, the Concept Plan proposes the integration of Frosh Pond into a broader system of rainwater interception, water storage, and irrigation. While still operating as a symbol of the UW’s past, Frosh Pond - made visible from a distance by Drumheller Fountain - can become a symbol of the university’s commitment to a sustainable future.

Throughout its history, the Rainier Vista has evolved to meet the needs of the contemporary university. The construction of the Sound Transit station at Husky Stadium and an increased concentration of bus traffic around the Montlake Triangle will make Rainier Vista a major commuter entry onto campus. The Concept Plan seeks to unite the operations of the station with the Vista in a way that is legible, functional, and welcoming. Although hardly used at present, Montlake Triangle might eventually be transformed into one of the University’s signature landscapes, becoming an integral part of daily arrivals and departures as well as creating additional space to serve the needs of less frequent events like football games, graduation, and the opening day crew races.

As the 21st century progresses, there is no doubt that the Rainier Vista will become even stronger as the image of UW and even more integrated into the daily life of the campus. The Concept Plan lays the groundwork that will insure that this escalation in use is accompanied by improvements in function and experience. The implementation of the Concept Plan initiatives will build additional value into this cherished landscape, preserving its history and ensuring its continued vitality in the years to come.
The Rainier Vista has developed unevenly as a landscape space. Over the course of a decade, the site that it occupies went from practically raw wilderness to fully realized Beaux Arts “city” to empty formal grounds. The subsequent ninety years saw the Vista transform gradually as a landscape and expand in its function as the iconic centerpiece of the modern University of Washington.

In 1906, as planning was underway for the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition (AYPE), the University of Washington, which had been in its northeast Seattle location for a decade, was in desperate need of more classrooms but without the resources to realize them. The exposition’s planners asked that the University’s Board of Regents allow the AYPE to occupy the lower two-thirds of campus, which were completely uncleared at this point. According to Herbert Condon, who was the business comptroller at the time, “the principal inducement the University authorities had, to comply with the suggestion of the joint use of the campus, was the prospect of reducing this wild forest to a finished campus.”

The landscape architect hired to plan the fair was John Charles Olmsted, of the Olmsted Brothers firm from Brookline, Massachusetts. Involved in an ongoing relationship with the Seattle Parks Department, Olmsted had been working on a master plan for Seattle Parks as well as a master plan for the University (1904) that was supplanted by exposition planning. The AYPE plan would transform the southwestern corner of campus from a dense wood to an open slope with an elaborate formal design of walks and gardens, pools and fountains. While the original Olmsted plan for the university had been fairly inward-looking, the AYPE
2008: The Vista Today

Drumheller Fountain is an iconic campus element but its water and power use is inconsistent with the University’s sustainability goals.

The granular path surface on the Lower Vista does not meet accessibility standards.

At the Burke-Gilman Trail pedestrians and bicycles are in conflict.
The Sustainable Vista

As the first major landscape project of the 21st century at the University of Washington, the renewed Rainier Vista presents an opportunity to demonstrate the applicability of sustainable practices, both visible and invisible, even in the most historically sensitive landscapes. Looking at the larger operations of the large-scale landscape, the Concept Plan treats pond water, stormwater runoff, water collection, site drainage, and irrigation as an integrated system of cleaning, recirculation, and reuse.

As demonstrated in the adjacent diagram, stormwater from surrounding buildings and pathways is collected in a separated storm drainage system while the sanitary sewer plumbing within buildings surrounding the corridor is rerouted to a dedicated sanitary sewer line. The stormwater runoff is directed to prefabricated cisterns installed within Frosh Pond. Operating in part as a system of water conservation, additional cistern volume reduces the effective depth and volume of water within the visible parts of Frosh Pond. Given that the water depth in the pond is currently about 5 feet, however, it is unlikely that this reduction in depth will affect the appearance of the pond.

Down slope, stormwater runoff from Stevens Way and surrounding buildings will be pre-treated and discharged to prefabricated cisterns located within the ramping area of the lower Rainier Vista. The two cisterns are to be hydraulically connected and overflows of the cisterns will be discharged to the 84-inch combined sewer overflow pipe, thereby reducing storm flows into the Metro sewer system.

The active water within Frosh Pond passes through a recirculation system comprised of vegetated cells installed above the lower Vista cisterns. The cells will be planted with a variety of wetland and emergent plants to provide varying levels of water treatment and visual appeal.

Reused stormwater fulfills the landscape irrigation demands along the Rainer Vista. Treated water will be pumped to the upper cisterns for reuse in the irrigation system surrounding the Sciences Quadrangle, Mary Gates and Johnson Halls and the area north of Stevens Way. Treated water is also used as fountain evaporation makeup water. Water stored in the lower Vista cistern irrigates the area of the Vista south of Stevens Way, including the area adjacent to Montlake Boulevard.