

CLCS/Art 120: The Vassar Campus

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Vassar of the Future?

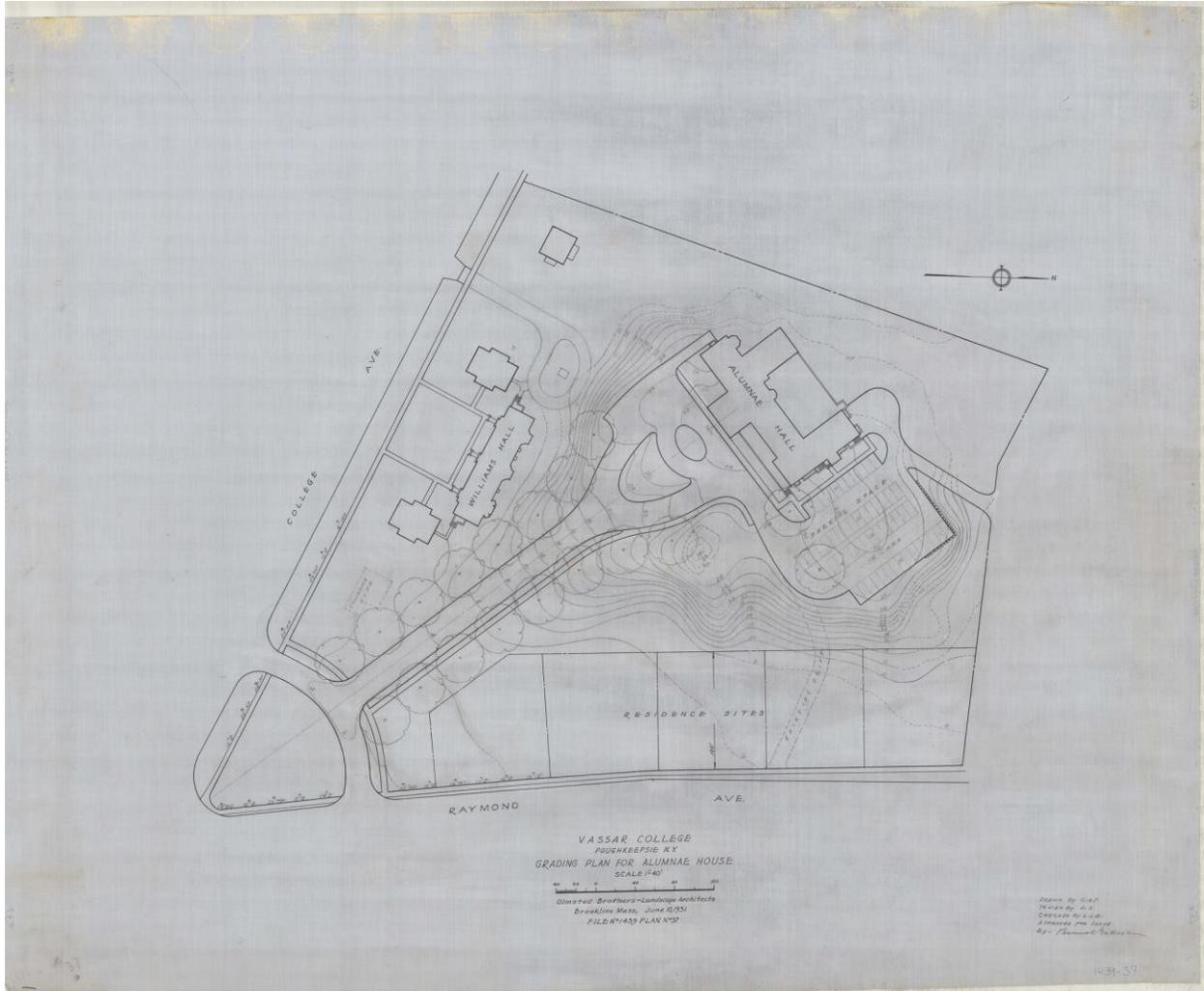
Itinerary: The Rock Lot (corner of Raymond Avenue and College Avenue)

In this class, we will consider the process of campus planning, an issue that has resonated throughout the course, and plans for Vassar of the future. The assigned reading by Eero Saarinen provides an interesting perspective on some aspects of planning unique to a campus – at least c. 1960, shortly after he produced campus plans for Vassar. But as Gary Hilderbrand discussed, the nature of planning has changed markedly in recent decades – an issue that has much to do with town/gown relations, and the turn away from protective, enclosed campuses to more open models. We will focus on one project that is currently in the works: the proposed Inn and Institute. The college has proposed building it on the corner of the Rock Lot, and tearing down Williams House to make way for its parking lot – a proposal that has engendered controversy, and is still mired in approval processes by local zoning, planning, and landmark bodies. (Should you want to know more, [the wikipedia site for Williams](#) is remarkably up to the minute, with links to journal articles from just a few days ago.) Your reading on moodle includes plans and renderings of the proposed new buildings.

The Rock Lot, so called for the giant rocky knoll at its center, is the site of Alumnae House, Williams House, and the green. It is interesting to consider the history of this site. By 1915, the college was talking about the need for a residence for women faculty (they were still living in Main with the students), and a home for the Associate Alumnae – at first seen as one building, then split into two. Williams Hall for Female Faculty was built in 1922, and Alumnae House 1924, both designed by the same firm, Hunt and Hunt – and presumably in tandem. In 1925, Beatrix Farrand proposed siting Kendrick House of Women Faculty on the Rock Lot, and suggested an interior faculty garden and rock garden that would tie together the site. (Although the Board backed this proposal, the donor wanted a site closer to the center of campus, to which the president acceded and, as we know, Kendrick was built across from Taylor Hall/Main Gate. No drawings survive for Farrand’s plan.) Percival Gallagher, the Olmsted Brothers partner who succeeded Farrand as Consulting Landscape Architect, was asked to study the Rock Lot. (His work on campus is one of our ongoing research projects, as you know.) One of his grading plans (below) is interesting for its suggestion of a bold axial approach to Alumnae House, traffic circulation, planting, and future residences on the site of the green. It remains to be seen what, if anything, came out of his proposals; and evidently not much has happened on the site thereafter, other than the recent erection of a demolition fence around Williams.

Assuming you can visit the Rock Lot now, please walk around this site, and consider the relation of the parts to the whole. What is the relation between Alumnae House and Williams? Between Williams and the residential stretch of College Avenue next to, and across from it? Although this lot is part of Vassar’s property, how does the green function as a “fuzzy boundary” between campus and community?

So, what makes sense for this site? How should campus planning move forward?



Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects, Grading Plan for Alumnae House, June 10, 1931. Courtesy of the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.