

After a week-long visit, Chinese landscape architects have schemes

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Advocates of a Chinese garden at Phalen Regional Park are hoping to see a pavilion similar to this one shown in Changsha, China at the St. Paul park. (photo courtesy of Bill Zajicek)



Visiting landscape architects Jon Wen and Jennifer Fan from Changsha, China visited the East Side's Phalen Regional Park to come up with design plans for a Changsha-style garden at the park. (photo courtesy of Bill Zajicek)

Plans in the works for new garden at Phalen Park

If there's any signs that the idea of a Chinese garden at Phalen Regional Park may have traction, the park's unique visitors last week may be one.

Two landscape architects from St. Paul's Chinese sister city, Changsha, China, paid a visit last week, using their expertise to come up with design concepts proposing a Chinese garden for the park.

The visiting architects, husband and wife team Jon Wen and Jennifer Fan, run Jianke Landscape Design Inc., a landscape architect firm with about 40 employees. They were connected with the St. Paulites through Lei Yixin, a sculpture artist who sculpted a rock that is now displayed at the park. Lei is an internationally known artist responsible for creating and carving the 30-foot Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial "Stone of Hope" installed in Washington, D.C.

The goal of the architects' visit was to come away with design concepts the architects can draw up — those concepts will then be material that proponents of the project can use to find funding.

The garden has been long dreamed of by Linda Mealey-Lohmann, founder of the Minnesota-China Friendship Garden Society, whose efforts helped push the project to get some state funding. The group has been advocating for introducing Chinese gardens into the Twin Cities for well over a decade, pointing out that while the region has several Japanese gardens, there are no Chinese gardens to speak of.

Thanks in part to the group's efforts, the Chinese garden is on Phalen Park's master plan, put out in 2011 by St. Paul Parks and Recreation and Ramsey County Parks and Recreation. The plan imagines a Changsha-style garden located to the north of the park swimming beach, on the western shore of Lake Phalen.

St. Paul has a sister city relationship with Changsha, China, that's been going since 1988. That relationship is part of the impetus for getting the Chinese garden with Changsha-style architecture.

The plan gained further traction earlier this year, when a state bonding bill allocated \$50,000 in funding for the design and construction of a Chinese garden at Phalen Regional Park.

Mealey Lohmann, along with East Siders Bill Zajicek and Romi Slowiak, showed the architects around the city, hosting them, providing them with meals, and showing off the area's cultural amenities. Their visit also included meals with state Sen. Fong Hawj and Rep. Tim Mahoney, as well as St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman.

Taking advantage of the nice weather, the architects toured Phalen Park several times throughout the week. They also visited Raspberry Island, just south of downtown St. Paul on the Mississippi River, where they looked at the park's use of rocks from the area to envision how rock formations could play into the design of the garden at Phalen.

In addition, they visited the Charlotte Partridge Ordway Japanese Garden at Como Park, as well as the Minneapolis Institute of Arts to look at both a Chinese rock garden and the museum's collection of Asian art.

Planning the park

As part of the visit, Chinese landscape architects met with counterparts from St. Paul Parks and Recreation to hash out the plan. The visiting architects are on a contract with St. Paul Parks and Recreation to come up with designs, which will be submitted around the end of the year.

Taking a preliminary concept sketch that was drawn up years ago, the team came up with a new design that proposes putting a Changsha-style pavilion on high ground on the north end of the park, that takes advantage of views to the lake, the park, and the channel area that runs through the park. The design also imagines a plaza near the water where tai chi and yoga activities could take place.

They also proposed adding areas to the garden that would highlight Hmong culture that's very prevalent on the East Side.

Hmong people have ancestral ties to China, and lived there before being pushed south into Laos and Cambodia, Mealey-Lohmann noted. There's also a minority group called the Miao in China that has ties to Hmong ancestry. They share some similar cultural traditions, she said.

Once more formal plans are drawn up, the plan is to do community engagement to get resident input, including from specific cultural groups, such as the Hmong.

So, why Phalen? Murphy says it's because the park is becoming a hub for promotion of culture. He points to the park's tradition of hosting the Dragon Boat Races, and the East Side's ethnic diversity, as reasons to put the garden at Phalen.

Mahoney calls the relationship with Changsha "a great cultural exchange for the two cities."

He figures the garden would set Phalen apart from other parks in the city, and help draw people to the East Side.

"Phalen will do very well to have an attraction that is unique to Phalen," he said.

Mahoney lives near the park, and walks his dog around Lake Phalen almost daily, he said.

He sees the garden as a part of a larger economic partnership — "our trade with China will only grow," he posits. To that end, he'll push for the project to get full funding. Though designs aren't complete yet, earlier estimates had the proposed garden costing about \$1 million.

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