Close by the Washington Park Arboretum, a new project combines the historic vista of Mount Rainier from the University of Washington campus with contemporary landscape design. The Lower Rainier Vista project was completed and opened to the public in July, 2015. The design, by the internationally known Seattle firm Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, creates a physical and visual connection that completes Rainier Vista.

The Olmsted Brothers, whose firm also laid out key components of the Arboretum, conceived Rainier Vista as the central axis of the 1909 Alaska Yukon Pacific Exposition, a world’s fair held on the then largely undeveloped campus of the University of Washington. The view along the vista from Red Square to Drumheller Fountain and on to Mount Rainier—called by UW Department of Architecture Professor Emeritus Grant Hildebrand one of the most important views in the state of Washington—creates the “fountain-to-mountain” experience that’s unique to the UW campus.

However, a small strip of road towards the end of the Vista, Northeast Pacific Place, carved through the sight line and broke the flow of the promenade. It also cut off a piece of land—the Montlake Triangle—from the campus. A 2008 master plan by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates proposed improving the campus connection by lowering Northwest Pacific Place under ground level and creating a land bridge over it. Accommodating foot traffic from the new link light rail station was an added consideration.

Gustafson Guthrie Nichol developed the design further. “The project is about setting up a fitting, campus-quality bone structure for the place within an intersection of
many transportation modes,” says Founding Principal Shannon Nichol. “The project utilizes a rediscovered corner of the UW campus to complete the historic Vista monument, while serving the intersecting people arriving or passing through the busy place on foot, via light rail and buses, on bicycles or in cars.”

Taking its cue from the master plan, the design reconnects the Montlake Triangle by lowering NE Pacific Place and the adjacent Burke Gilman Trail—and by extending the Rainier Vista axis with an elegant, inward-curving land bridge. For the curves of the bridge, Gustafson Guthrie Nichol borrowed the pointed Gothic arch motif of collegiate architecture and doubled it to give the bridge a narrow waistline. The span is both economic and aesthetic, while having the added benefit of casting less shadow on the roadway below.

One intention of the new design was to enhance the view through careful grading of the land form. The designers strategically placed horizons at key Mount Rainier viewing points along the Vista to obscure the traffic along Montlake Boulevard NE and NE Pacific Street below. New areas of level lawn were created along the Vista to function as “front porches” to the University. These new spaces will host a variety of activities, from impromptu Frisbee games to formal commencement ceremonies.

Gustafson Guthrie Nichol has a lot of experience designing high-use landscapes in complex urban contexts. The firm was the recipient of the Smithsonian’s Cooper Hewitt National Design Award for Landscape Architecture in 2011. Recent and current work includes the National Museum of African American History and Culture, CityCenterDC, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Campus, and Seattle’s Pike/Pine Renaissance Street Plan.

Also involved in the project design were structural and civil engineers from KPFF Consulting Engineers, working under the direction of the University of Washington and project partners Sound Transit and the Washington State Department of Transportation. Project

ABOVE TOP: The inward-curving land bridge over the lowered Burke Gilman Trail and NE Pacific Place. (Photo courtesy Gustafson Guthrie Nichol)

ABOVE BOTTOM: Rendering of the Vista showing what the Montlake Triangle will look like with a mature canopy of big-leaf maples and red oaks. (Image courtesy Gustafson Guthrie Nichol)

OPPOSITE: Understory plants on the new Vista include many natives, such as longleaf Oregon grape and coast strawberry.
complications included a site laced with regional sewer lines and university campus utilities, doing construction over an existing underground garage, protecting heritage trees, and maintaining a busy electric trolley system.

Walking down the Vista from Drumheller Fountain, paths run on each side of deep-green grass bordered by even darker-green conifers. The paths curve together to cross NE Pacific Place, then curve apart again to enter Montlake Triangle. Here, the long, narrow promenade of lawn and trees opens up to larger park space with a central lawn surrounded by planting beds filled with sapling trees, young shrubs, groundcovers and ornamental grasses. Pathways connect pedestrians and cyclists to the University Medical Center complex on the right and Husky Stadium on the left—two important symbols of the University—while straight ahead lies Mount Rainier. Another path on the Triangle leads to a new walk/bike bridge spanning Montlake Boulevard and connects everything to the upcoming UW Station.

The designers intend that as the newly planted trees on either side of the Vista mature, the beloved wooded character of the campus will spill out to the Montlake Triangle. Because this area is on top of a parking garage, the trees had to be carefully sited in areas that would provide enough soil volume for good growth.

The trees, all natives, include Douglas fir (Pseudotsuga menziesii), western red cedar (Thuja plicata), and bigleaf maple (Acer macrophyllum). Nichol observes that bigleaf maple is our only native true-shade tree and will grow quickly to establish a canopy. Its high branches, as they touch, will repeat the Gothic arch pattern. The conifers will grow more slowly but eventually bring in the native-forest feeling. Most of the shrubs and ground covers are also native plants. They include longleaf Oregon grape (Berberis nervosa), nootka rose (Rosa nutkana), evergreen huckleberry (Vaccinium ovatum ‘Thunderbird’), coast strawberry (Fragaria chiloensis), and Oregon stonecrop (Sedum oreganum).

Standing on the Montlake Triangle at the end of the Vista, the scene has a sense of movement: bicycles and joggers on the Burke Gilman, traffic buzzing all around the triangle, and pedestrians and bikers going to and from the campus and hospital—soon to be joined by Sound Transit commuters. Looking back up the Vista, the white geyser of Drumheller Fountain shines brightly. The Lower Rainier Vista project brilliantly celebrates and expands the historic vision.

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