



THE GARDEN CONSERVANCY

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May 27, 2020

Ms. Marnique Heath
Chairperson
Historic Preservation Review Board
1100 4th Street, SW, Suite E650
Washington, DC 20024

Re: Plaza sculpture garden at the National Geographic Headquarters, Washington, DC

Dear Ms. Heath,

We understand National Geographic has plans to redesign its headquarters campus. As designed, the current plans would necessitate the removal and/or destruction of “Marabar,” a significant work of art by renowned artist Elyn Zimmerman that was commissioned by National Geographic in 1984 for the entry plaza. The Garden Conservancy joins other preservation and cultural groups—including the Cultural Landscape Foundation, Whitney Museum director Adam Weinberg, Adam Gopnik of *The New Yorker* magazine, and many notable architects and art preservationists—in urging the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) for the District of Columbia to reconsider its previous approval for the renovation plans.

In the event that the review board has not been made aware of the sculpture’s presence in the plaza, and its historic significance, allow me to make the case for its preservation.

Founded in 1888 with a focus on geography, exploration, science, world cultures, and environmental conservation, it is very appropriate that the National Geographic center its entry plaza around a piece that is a physical representation of the organization’s mission. Marabar, named for the fictional Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*, by E.M. Forster is a superlative example of the use of art and landscape design to integrate a building with its surroundings. It was the first large-scale project of Elyn Zimmerman, who is recognized as one of the most important environmental artists of the 20th century, and the plaza was conceived by the influential architecture/planning firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, in collaboration with award-winning landscape architect James Urban.

Elyn Zimmerman has created numerous sculptures and installations, including an untitled work for the 1995 World Trade Center Memorial, *Suspended Arcs*, for Olympic Park in Beijing, China, and *Assembly of Friends* for the US Embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Her work has been acclaimed by critics and cultural historians such as Marc Treib, who in 2018 wrote *Elyn Zimmerman: Places & Projects, 40 years*. Zimmerman’s work is held in the permanent

collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, British Museum, Museum of Modern Art, and New Orleans Museum of Art and has been exhibited widely. She has received numerous awards from arts organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2016, she and Todao Ando received the Isamu Noguchi award.

The Garden Conservancy is the nation's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving, sharing, and celebrating America's gardens and diverse gardening traditions for the education and inspiration of the public. We champion the vital role that gardens play in our history and our shared cultural heritage.

We believe that the proposed redesign of the National Geographic headquarters and destruction of this significant modernist sculpture and its courtyard would be a loss of an important example of joining art and landscape to manifest cultural heritage. For this reason, we urge the HPRB to reconsider their assessment of this application.

On behalf of the Garden Conservancy and our board of directors, I thank you for your thoughtful review of the application.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Brayton Hall". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a stylized "H".

James Brayton Hall
President and CEO