



## THE GARDEN CONSERVANCY

20 NAZARETH WAY | PO BOX 608, GARRISON, NY 10524 | 845.424.6500/6501FAX | GARDENCONSERVANCY.ORG

James Brayton Hall  
*President and CEO*

September 10, 2020

Ms. Mina Wright, Commissioner,  
National Capital Planning Commission  
401 9th Street, NW  
Suite 500N  
Washington, DC 20004

Re: "Hirshhorn Museum Sculpture Garden Revitalization Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden," 700 Independence Avenue, SW; Washington, DC; applicant: Smithsonian Institution; NCPC file # 7889

Dear Madam:

In reference to the above proposal by the Smithsonian Institution to remodel the sunken sculpture garden at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, the Garden Conservancy joins the Cultural Landscape Foundation, Docomomo DC, senior historic preservation officer Andrew Lewis at the DC Historic Preservation Office, and other individuals and cultural organizations in raising concerns. As currently proposed, the redesign destroys key features of the postwar landscape design, a masterwork of Modernist landscape architecture.

The Hirshhorn Museum Sculpture Garden has been called "one of the finest Modernist landscape designs we have in the Federal city" by Richard Longstreth, professor emeritus of American studies at George Washington University. The garden's design by Lester Collins showcases his signature fusion of minimalism and Asian design philosophy and complements the design of the Hirshhorn Museum, which it faces across Jefferson Drive. Collins' landscape design beautifully echoes and interacts with Pritzker Prize-winning architect Gordon Bunshaft's design of both the museum and the pool in the sunken garden, maintaining the design integrity of the museum-garden ensemble. Further, Collins' design also added plantings with sculptural character to the garden and established it as a vibrant urban park. The garden is a contributing feature to the National Mall Historic District, it is under review for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and it receives close to one million visitors per year.

As a landscape architect also trained as an architect, and as the leader of a national organization dedicated to preserving gardens, I consider this sculpture garden by Lester

Collins one of the most important examples of modernist landscape design. It is in complete harmony with the Brutalist architecture of the Hirshhorn Museum, a significant architecture movement that deserves to be celebrated and preserved. Lester Albertson Collins was an important twentieth-century landscape architect whose work ranged from the National Zoo in Washington to a master plan for the City of Roanoke. His significance in creating modernist landscapes and gardens is increasingly being recognized; his 85-acre Innisfree Garden in Millbrook, NY, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places just last year. This year, in further recognition of the significance of Collins' contributions, the Period of Significance and Integrity Analysis Report for the Sculpture Garden was completed and established the importance of Lester Collins' contributions to the historic significance of the Garden and revised the period of significance for the Garden to be 1974–1981. This historic recognition was not in place when the current redesign was first proposed in 2019 and needs to be taken into account in further reviews of the proposed redesign.

The Garden Conservancy commends the Smithsonian and architect and artist Hiroshi Sugimoto's efforts to make the sculpture garden more accessible and to reopen the original underground tunnel, improving the connection of the museum to the garden. We believe improving public access to and use of the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden is important and can be balanced with the preservation of this historic space. Reorganization of garden spaces to create a performance area and the proposed stacked stone walls create a disconnect in the design cohesiveness of the garden and museum and would destroy Collins' design.

We urge the Hirshhorn to consider ways to preserve the integrity of this important and inviting Modernist garden. As designed by Collins, the sculpture garden is a masterpiece that not only displays and celebrates modern art, but is itself a work of living modern art.

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 Hirshhorn Museum's Sculpture Garden will have an adverse effect on the space itself and on its design integrity with the museum.

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

Sincerely,



James Brayton Hall, President and CEO

cc: Earl A. Powell III, Chairman, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts;  
Marnique Heath, Chair, Historic Review Board;  
Melissa Chiu, Director, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden;  
Sharon Park, Assoc. Director of Historic Preservation, Smithsonian Institution