



THE GARDEN CONSERVANCY

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July 16, 2021

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 Commissioner Wright:

I am writing to comment on the recent revisions to the Smithsonian Institution's proposed remodel of the sunken Sculpture Garden at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC. While the revisions to the proposed plan would address several existing access problems, changes to defining elements of the Sculpture Garden remain a concern.

The Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden is a 20th-century marvel, the product of Pritzker Prize-winning architect Gordon Bunshaft's austere Brutalism and landscape architect Lester Collins' Asian-inspired minimalism. As designed by Bunshaft (and retained in the Collins renovations), the shape of the existing reflecting pool echoes the long, rectangular window on the side of the museum building, providing a clear linkage between the Sculpture Garden and the Museum. Renovations designed by Collins in 1977 added greenery, including plantings with sculptural character, and retained the overall museum-garden design connectivity, while creating a more welcoming and comfortable environment. It is in complete harmony with the Brutalist architecture of the Hirshhorn Museum and Bunshaft himself viewed it as an improvement.

The District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office (DCHPO) found that the Sculpture Garden retained integrity of design, materials, and workmanship. In addition to being a contributing property to the National Mall Historic District, the Sculpture Garden has been found separately eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. DCHPO's evaluation of the Sculpture Garden's significance credited the fact that the "limited material palette that defines the character of these spaces is generally unaltered."

The Garden Conservancy commends the Smithsonian's and Hiroshi Sugimoto's efforts to make the Sculpture Garden more accessible by reopening the tunnel. This reinforces the essential connection between the Garden and the Museum, while lowering the central gallery's partition wall creates a visual experience of the Garden for people in the National Mall. These improvements would have a lasting and positive impact on the Sculpture Garden.

With degrees in both architecture and landscape architecture, and as the leader of a national organization dedicated to preserving gardens, I am deeply aware of the need to preserve and celebrate our shared cultural legacy. As a longtime art museum administrator, I also understand the importance of enhancing landmarked sites to engage the public and adapt to new programming needs.

While we consider the proposed introduction of new materials and structures a loss, we understand that this functional landscape is an extension of the Museum galleries and that the space itself needs to accommodate a growing and changing collection and new programming requirements. At the same time, the landscape is an important Modernist garden whose character should be preserved in a fashion accessible to future generations even after any major changes are made. With both of those goals in mind, we urge the Smithsonian to thoroughly document key aspects of the current design before undertaking major alterations.

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 lives and our shared cultural heritage.

On behalf of the Garden Conservancy and our board of directors, I thank you for your thoughtful review of the proposed revisions to the application. We urge you to find a way to not only accommodate new needs, but also document this historic work of living modern art so that it is preserved for the education and inspiration of future generations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Brayton Hall". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

James Brayton Hall
President and CEO

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