

The Committee of 100

on the Federal City



November 24, 2020

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cc: Julia Koster, Secretary to the Commission and OPE Director, info@ncpc.gov

RE: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Revitalization, Submitted in Advance of
December 3, Committee of 100 on the Federal City Testimony Before the Commission

Director Acosta:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the current proposal to restore/ revitalize the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden – one of our nation’s historically significant, mid-20th century monumental structures and urban landscapes. We comment as a Consulting Party under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (54 USC §300101 et seq) and submit this letter in advance of testifying on same at the December 3 Commission meeting.

Throughout this current consultation process, we have been heartened by what appears to be the thoughtful proposal for treatment of the exterior of the Hirshhorn Museum itself. The careful recreation of the “drum” exterior masonry replacement panels and deftly-handled thermal/insulation retrofit are particularly praiseworthy. Notable also is the plan to restore and “reimagine” the now-closed access tunnel under Jefferson Drive between the north side of the Fountain Plaza and the Sculpture Garden – restoring one of architect Gordon Bunshaft’s signature Hirshhorn concepts.

What is proposed for The Sculpture Garden is, however, the more complex challenge. Described by many as a palimpsest, the Garden reflects the handiwork of two 20th century American masters – architect Gordon Bunshaft and landscape architect Lester Collins (among others). We were pleased with the decision to advance the proposed period of historic significance of the Sculpture Garden to 1974/1981 (*Period of Significance and Integrity Report*) to include Collins’ important contribution. In so doing, you recognize Collins’ rightful place in the history of American landscape design.

Many aspects of the current Sculpture Garden proposal are sound including: restoration/recreation of the badly-damaged perimeter, shuttered aggregate retaining walls, better opening the garden to the north (Mall) side, proposed new plant material plan, exterior lighting, and sensitive upgrading of ramps, steps, and balustrades for code conformance – particularly the Americans with Disabilities Act. Also noteworthy are wholly new concepts in re-ordering the general “floorplan” of garden space into three general areas in anticipation of new uses and a lively and publicly-inviting Sculpture Garden.

Having said this, we hope to convince the Commission in its deliberations to reject two problematic choices being proposed - one an issue of subtraction, the other of addition.

Bunshaft Reflecting Pool: The proposal to render meaningless the historic, black Bunshaft-designed reflecting pool is, to our thinking, the loss of a critically-significant historic design element. The pool harkens to the Garden's earliest iteration and is, arguably, the most significant garden palimpsest surviving. The synchronicity or interplay between the pool and the large "slit" window on the north face of the museum drum is unmistakable. It joins them together. They are on axis, one a reflection of the other - a yin and yang, if you will. The interplay was (and remains) intentional. There is no doubt what Bunshaft was about. So much so that Lester Collins (recognizing this at the time) resisted Smithsonian efforts to remove it in his remaking of the Garden in the late 1970's/80's. The current proposal effectively burying it within the larger proposed new water feature – consigns it to oblivion. The Bunshaft Reflecting Pool should stand alone and remain (and prominently) to function as designed. A new design solution for this prominent new central area balancing better new needs (such as removable performance stage) while preserving the historic integrity of the pool is surely not beyond the talents of the current design team.

Stacked Stone Petition Walls: The proposed introduction of rough-hewn, granite, dry-laid stone partition walls would radically contradict the overall historic material vocabulary of the Hirshhorn complex and is wholly inconsistent with the Sculpture Garden. The very sparseness of the shuttered concrete walls throughout the garden was likewise – intentional, to both Bunshaft and to Collins, as the background better to feature rather than compete with the more important sculpture. Shuttered concrete must likewise must be the material choice for replacing the deteriorated partition walls. This material is the unmistakable hallmark of the Brutalist architectural style of which the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden is so nationally prominent an American example. We strongly urge your reconsideration of this proposal.

If any cultural institution in the United States understands these issues, it is most assuredly the Smithsonian Institution. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide the Committee of 100's comments on this important and wholly compelling project. We look forward to providing testimony on these points at the upcoming December 3 meeting of the Commission. If we may provide clarification or answer any questions, please contact us. We appreciate your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "K. Robinson".

Chair, Committee of 100 on the Federal City