



May 25, 2020

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

Dear Ms. Heath and Members of the Historic Preservation Review Board,

I write from The Cultural Landscape Foundation (TCLF) in response to [a letter dated May 22, 2020](#), to the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB), written by Cary R. Kadlecek, of Goulston & Storrs, on behalf of the National Geographic Society (NGS). Mr. Kadlecek's letter concerns *MARABAR*, the threatened site-specific sculptural installation by New York-based artist Elyn Zimmerman on the National Geographic campus in Washington, D.C., whose fate the HPRB will consider in an upcoming meeting. While one might have hoped that Mr. Kadlecek's letter could illuminate further facts about *MARABAR*, we find that it contains several inaccuracies, which we are compelled to address.

The letter begins by stating that the HPRB "should not reconsider its concept approval to account for Marabar because Marabar is not historic..." But, of course, NGS is not the arbiter of what is and is not considered historic in the District of Columbia. While the construction dates of *MARABAR* and the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) addition are indeed outside the *current* period of significance (1815–1959) established for the Sixteenth Street Historic District, periods of significance are routinely expanded to recognize the historicity of works of art, architecture, and landscape architecture when they are under review. And likewise, according to the HPRB's criteria for designating historic properties, such works can certainly be deemed historic if they are found to be "of exceptional importance," even when they are less than 50 years old.

Two very recent examples clearly show this to be the case. Earlier this year, the Smithsonian Institution, in agreement with the District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office, expanded the period of significance for the Hirshhorn Museum Sculpture Garden to include [the year 1981](#), thus taking into account the work of landscape architect Lester Collins, who redesigned the original sculpture garden created in 1974 by Gordon Bunshaft, of SOM, which had been widely panned. And in September 2016, Pershing Park on Pennsylvania Avenue, which was designed by landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg and opened in 1981, was [determined eligible for listing](#) in the National Register of Historic Places, expanding upon two earlier designations for Pennsylvania Avenue, first as a National Historic Site in 1966, and again in 2007 when its period of significance was expanded to 1962.

These are but the two cases that come first to mind that: [a] confirm that for campus landscapes like National Geographic it is common to revisit earlier National Register designations; and [b] demonstrate that projects less than 50 years old can be deemed eligible for listing in both the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places. We believe the collaboration between SOM (with now-retired architect David Childs) and Elyn Zimmerman at the NGS campus meet the threshold for such a designation. The fact that NGS now disagrees with that assessment, having recently asked the HPRB to place the [2017 nomination of the Edward Durell Stone-designed building on](#)

[hold](#) as it considers the wider campus setting, should not deter the review board from exercising its own judgment in the matter.

Mr. Kadlecek further states that “Marabar is not a feature of the Washington built landscape that draws attention,” citing a handful of tourist guidebooks and one book on outdoor sculpture in the District of Columbia. It is unclear what the phrase “draws attention” means in this context, particularly given the attention the sculpture has drawn from academics and design aficionados in the form of numerous recent letters, sent to the HPRB, indicating that Zimmerman’s installation is of considerable import. As a reminder, [Whitney Museum of American Art Director Adam Weinberg wrote](#) that ***MARABAR* is a “masterpiece”** and described Zimmerman as **“one of the great public artists of her generation.”** [Marc Treib, professor of architecture emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote](#) that **“‘Marabar’ is a key representative of American site-specific art**, elegant in its form, impressive in its use of stone, and engaging in its effects,” adding, “It is certainly **one of the great works of the later twentieth century**, and one of the few located in a city.” [New York University Professor Joseph Low \(“Pepe”\) Karmel wrote](#) that **“Marabar is one of the most important sculptural installations of the twentieth century. It will be included prominently in my book *Abstract Art: A Global History*, to be published by Thames & Hudson in October of this year.”** These and many other recent testimonials, alongside the extensive published body of scholarly literature on *MARABAR* (which Mr. Kadlecek has neglected to mention) are surely an indication of the sculpture’s ability to draw attention.

In a section of his letter labeled “NGS was Forthcoming with its Plans to Remove Marabar” (p. 4), Mr. Kadlecek writes, “In his letters, Mr. Birnbaum insinuates that NGS kept the removal of Marabar a secret. This is incorrect. NGS never tried to hide the removal of Marabar.” But TCLF has never stated, neither in its correspondence with the National Geographic Society, the HPRB, nor with any media, that National Geographic was attempting to “hide the removal of Marabar” or “keep it a secret.” Rather, we have simply pointed out that, although *MARABAR* is an integral part of the National Geographic campus, the renderings of the site presented to the HPRB did not label or otherwise identify the work of art, and that the pertinent staff report to the HPRB did not mention it. Specifically, in a [correspondence dated April 14, 2020, to Angelo M. Grima, executive vice president and general counsel of the National Geographic Society, TCLF wrote](#): “The July 15, 2019, presentation to the HPRB makes *no mention* of *MARABAR* ... the Zimmerman installation is represented by an unlabeled schematic given the same weight and significance as the adjacent foliage. More pared back schematic renderings of *MARABAR* appear on pages 20 and 30, again without any label or mention.” (In fact, on pages 20 and 30, only *MARABAR*’s water feature is illustrated—unlabeled—while the boulders are not delineated.

Notably, Mr. Kadlecek’s recent letter only confirms the point TCLF made. He writes: “There was no need for NGS to specifically highlight the removal of Marabar beyond any other elements of the existing plaza.” This follows a revealing statement on page two of the same letter: “Since the Board’s jurisdiction does not extend to Marabar, NGS had no obligation to specifically discuss Marabar in its plans in any event since it not relevant to the concept review.”

Mr. Kadlecek’s letter further states that “In November 2017, NGS sent Ms. Zimmerman its letter, explaining the reasons for the need to remove Marabar and offering to carefully remove the large granite stones to a new location.” That is not accurate. NGS *did not* offer to “remove the large granite stones to a new location.” Rather, this is what [NGS wrote to Elyn Zimmerman on November 29, 2017](#):

*The Marabar sculpture will need to be removed from National Geographic's campus in order to accomplish the re-design of the courtyard. **The Society wants to provide you the opportunity to remove the Marabar sculpture.** In order to meet our construction milestones, we will need to know by September 1, 2018, which is the end of our design development phase, of **your intent to move the Marabar sculpture.** If you do not let us know by then of your intent to move the sculpture, the sculpture will need to be removed by us. [emphasis added]*

The offer to move the work at NGS' expense was made at a later date. In an [April 8, 2020, letter to TCLF, Mr. Grima at NGS stated](#) that the organization has "a quote for the relocation of the stones and [we] have made that a budget line item in our plans." Mr. Kadlec's recent letter adds: "NGS is still willing to carefully remove and relocate the large granite stones at its expense and produce a professional photographic record of Marabar, as offered to Ms. Zimmerman nearly three years ago, either to New Jersey (or similar location) or possibly as a donation to an art museum." We therefore ask NGS to share the details of this estimate. Setting aside the fact that MARABAR is a site-specific installation created to complement the 1981 SOM addition and the 1964 Edward Durrell Stone-designed 17<sup>th</sup> Street building, has NGS completed an engineering study that demonstrates how the boulders could be removed from the plaza, transported, and then reinstalled at another site without damaging them?

Mr. Kadlec goes on to assert (p.5), without documentation, "Marabar also has many safety and maintenance problems that warrant its removal. Due to its design and location, there have been many instances over the years of people falling into the pool, leading to numerous personal injury and workers compensation claims." Given that the sculpture has remained in place for more than 35 years, one wonders when NGS first became aware of such "safety" problems, or if it has moved to address these problems in any way. At present, the only apparent effort to mitigate such concerns is signage that asks visitors not to "climb on the rocks." There are, in any case, myriad ways to address such concerns, as when NGS dispatched security guards to the plaza "on duckling duty," safeguarding a family of ducks that came to reside in MARABAR's pool in 2011, as [reported in the Washington Post](#). Be that as it may, as TCLF noted in its April 14, 2020, letter: "It is certainly the case that many arts and cultural institutions that are stewards to potentially hazardous works of art have developed appropriate solutions other than outright demolition."

The letter goes on to say, somewhat remarkably, "Marabar is NGS' property located on NGS' land... Accordingly, NGS is free to exclude public access and to remove Marabar if it desires." As an internationally renowned institution that promotes cultural awareness and sensitivity, is that really the message that NGS wants to send? How does that stance fit with NGS's mission and its expressed commitment "to exploring and protecting our planet. We fund hundreds of research and conservation projects around the world each year and inspire new generations through our education initiatives and resources."

Finally, we were pleased to learn recently that OLIN, the distinguished landscape architecture firm for the J. Paul Getty Museum in California and the designers of the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden, is involved in the design process for the National Geographic project. (It is, however, unclear when the firm was engaged, as OLIN does not appear on review documents previously presented to the HPRB.)

We would encourage the architects, working in collaboration with OLIN and Elyn Zimmerman, to determine whether *MARABAR* could be retained *in situ* within the new building envelope (where there appears to be adequate space) or, failing that, with much greater risk to the piece itself, integrated elsewhere on the National Geographic campus as part of the greater plaza renovation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large 'C' followed by a smaller 'B' and a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR  
President + CEO  
The Cultural Landscape Foundation

cc: Steve Callcott, Deputy Preservation Officer, DC Office of Planning