



April 1, 2020

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) about the matter of the conceptual plans for alterations to the National Geographic headquarters, located at 1145 17th Street NW, within the 16th Street Historic District. As you may recall, in July 2019, National Geographic and the firm Hickok Cole Architects filed plans for approval by the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) seeking to create a new main entry and events space for the National Geographic complex. On August 1, 2019, the HPRB [approved the conceptual plans](#) as being “compatible with the character of the 16th Street Historic District with the condition that the first-floor canopy projection on the 1963 building be retained.”

On March 31, 2020, TCLF [officially enrolled](#) the National Geographic headquarters in its *Landslide* program, which draws immediate and lasting attention to threatened landscapes and landscape features across the country. We did so because the aforementioned plans would demolish the widely acclaimed sculpture *MARABAR*, which was created by celebrated artist Elyn Zimmerman and installed in the National Geographic plaza in the early 1980s, opening to the public in 1984.

TCLF only recently became aware of the plans for the new pavilion and plaza at the National Geographic headquarters, so we were unable to express our concerns when the work initially came before the HPRB. And although the HPRB approved the plans, it is as yet unclear whether the review board was properly made aware of the sculpture’s presence in the plaza, or of its significance. We note that the [renderings of the site](#), as presented to the review board, did not label or otherwise identify the work of art; neither did the [staff report](#) mention the sculptural installation, which is an integral part of the larger campus design completed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

But the work is indeed significant. For, as our research has shown, *MARABAR* was Zimmerman’s first large-scale and (ostensibly) permanent project. The work brought her significant exposure and was widely published, influencing the [course of her career](#). Myriad influential writers and critics have praised the work, extolling its virtues in magazines, scholarly publications, and newspapers. Writing in the *New York Times* in July 1988, William Zimmer, for example, said that the artist must consider *MARABAR* to be “her greatest triumph.” In *The Meaning of Gardens*:

Idea, Place, and Action (1990: MIT Press), the prominent landscape architect and author Peter Walker wrote:

Elyn Zimmerman, in her sculpture Marabar, takes this same gestural notion and makes a space, the water, into the gesture that cuts through the rocks. In a setting of a rather ordinary building, garden, and stones, the space becomes more powerful than the objects and holds them together in a way that makes the entire setting remarkable.

Noted historian and critic Marc Treib wrote the following about the National Geographic project in *Elyn Zimmerman: Places + Projects, Forty Years* (2018: Grounds for Sculpture):

Marabar, arguably the most substantial and yet ethereal of Zimmerman's works, overlays a further dimension to the dialogue between the natural and the cultural. While the rocks are the obvious intruders into the built zone, the cleaving and polishing of their surfaces create an intermediary link between the natural and the built. Reflection, the play of light and movement animate the inert stones with the movement of people and trees that dance across their surfaces. The slash of water demarcates the path to the entry of the building. The polished surfaces of the boulders draw up the water across their faces, as if the pool's surface had been transposed into a vertical plane. Important here is the intermediate zone of illusion that mitigates the precise division of the work into the natural upon the constructed, or the figure upon the ground. The "constructed" faces of the stones and the consequent reflection of both the static and kinetic surroundings upon them, blur the harsh, binary distinction and invoke a third, ambiguous, and shifting set of readings.

While one could continue to highlight the accolades the artwork has received, suffice it to say that the project remains one of the most prominent in the artist's extraordinary oeuvre, which includes a great many high-profile commissions that have garnered important honors and awards. Indeed, Zimmerman's work has been featured in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of America Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, for example, and it has been recognized by awards from the Art Commission of the City of New York, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Maryland chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

Among Zimmerman's many large-scale public projects are commissions from the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, New Jersey; the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden at the New Orleans Museum of Art; the U.S. State Department for the embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; and the Vancouver Art Commission for a prominent project in the city center. Zimmerman served as a member of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts from 2003 to 2008, and in

2016 she, along with Tadao Ando, received the Isamu Noguchi Award, given annually to practitioners who “share Noguchi’s spirit of innovation, global consciousness, and East-West exchange.” Our recent [interview with the artist](#) about her career and her work for National Geographic provides additional context on the project.

As is also relevant to the issue at hand, the DC Preservation League, in March 2017, [nominated](#) the Edward Durell Stone-designed building at the National Geographic headquarters for designation as a local historic landmark; the District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office, however, felt that the applicant should pursue a nomination for the entire campus, which the National Geographic Society has agreed to prepare and submit. As that nomination moves forward, the sculptural installation, which retains its integrity in every category established by the National Register of Historic Places, should be recognized for its significance under Category E (Artistry: with “high artistic or aesthetic values that contribute significantly to the heritage and appearance of the District of Columbia or the nation”) and Category F (Work of a Master: as the notable work of “craftsmen, artists, sculptors, architects, landscape architects, urban planners, engineers, builders, or developers whose works have influenced the evolution of their fields of endeavor, or are significant to the development of the District of Columbia or the nation”). Although *MARABAR* will not have achieved its significance within the past 50 years, one notes that “such properties will qualify if they are *integral parts of districts that do meet the criteria*” (emphasis added), or if they are “of exceptional importance.”

We regard the absence of consideration for Zimmerman’s work during the review process as an unfortunate oversight—one that we hope and believe there is still time to correct. We therefore ask the HPRB to reconsider its earlier approval of the project, given that it could not have acted with the full benefit and awareness of information it did not possess.

Sincerely,



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

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