



March 26, 2021

Carly Bond
Historic Preservation Specialist
Smithsonian Facilities Office of Planning, Design and Construction
600 Maryland Avenue SW, Suite 5001
Washington, DC 20013-7012

Dear Ms. Bond,

As an official consulting party to the National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 review now underway for the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., The Cultural Landscape Foundation (TCLF) is pleased to add the following remarks to the public record regarding the [NCPC Supplemental Narrative of March 1, 2021](#) presented to consulting parties at the [Section 106 Meeting #6](#) on March 10, 2021 concerning alterations to the inner partition wall and reflecting pool.

As we have written and testified on several occasions, TCLF is generally supportive of the Sculpture Garden revitalization effort and its need to create a defined area for performance art, and we commend leadership at the Hirshhorn and the Smithsonian for undertaking this much-needed and arduous task. It should be noted that the present effort would result in the creation of two designated spaces for performance arts, performances and other events – one in the West Gallery and the other in the Central Gallery.

Introduction

There remain two major adverse effects that merit attention: the expanded pool area and the introduction of stacked stone walls, especially in the central core. The March 10, 2021 Section 106 meeting was convened to present a revised version of the revitalization plan narrowly tailored to respond to two specific concerns raised by the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) on December 3, 2020: expansions to the historic rectangular pool that is part of the original plan by architect Gordon Bunshaft and retained in a subsequent overlay by landscape architect Lester Collins, and the use of stacked stone walls along the inner partition wall. The Hirshhorn's "Revised Reflecting Pool Alternative", which now retains the original dimensions of the rectangular pool, ultimately still fails because it does not address the fundamental alterations and adverse effects to the [visual and spatial organization](#) of the Central Gallery, the primary consideration as noted in the Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes, which underpins this Section 106 review. And it retains the stacked stone walls.

Perhaps the most disconcerting development is the threat by Hiroshi Sugimoto, the artist tasked with redesigning the Sculpture Garden, to resign from the project unless he gets the stacked stone walls. As noted below, Hirshhorn representatives did not dispute this threat during the March 10 Section 106 meeting. This threat undercuts the purported "purpose and need" for the stacked stone walls and the latest assertion that they solve heretofore unmentioned acoustics problems created by the existing aggregate concrete walls.

Adverse Effects to the Central Gallery

The Hirshhorn has established that a defined space for performance art is necessary to fulfilling its mission. In the [April 10, 2019](#) and [February 24, 2020](#) presentations to Section 106 consulting parties, the Hirshhorn identified the West Gallery as a place for performance art, performances and exhibitions with an ability to accommodate 400 seated spectators (attendance number noted in the latter presentation). The institution also notes the need for a defined space for performance art, etc. in the Central Gallery. **Consequently, there will be two spaces within the Sculpture Garden for performance art, performances, and exhibitions.** What has not been well articulated is the reason why the new pool (with terraced seating when drained) and stacked stone walls are inextricably linked to this programmatic need in the Central Gallery. Would the Hirshhorn please share with consulting parties examples of options they explored for defined performance areas within the Central Gallery that do not include the new pool and stacked stone walls thereby avoiding adverse effects?

In the March 10, 2021 consulting parties meeting, Hirshhorn associate curator Marina Isgro said: “The big advantage, from a performance point of view, is the terraced seating allowed by the new southern portion ... [which] kind of allows us to create a really intimate gathering space that can’t necessarily be achieved by rows of chairs.” While the deficiency of “rows of chairs” was not explored or otherwise explained, it seems reasonable that other solutions exist that don’t result in such a radical intervention. Or is the Hirshhorn asserting that the new pool is the one and only option that addresses their needs?

[Page four of the Executive Summary](#) of the “Supplemental Narrative” says: “The reflecting pool, once a central element in the rigorous composition of the Sculpture Garden is now overwhelmed by the complex landscape and scale of contemporary art. It offers the potential to again be a focal point for the Sculpture Garden, a place of gathering and inspiration.”

Leaving aside how the pool is currently “overwhelmed by the complex landscape and scale of contemporary art” (one of many unsupported declarations in the document along with “The existing Garden is both uninspiring to performance artists and inhospitable to our broader public as a welcoming civic gathering space”), the addition of the second pool means the Hirshhorn will fail to make the existing pool “a focal point for the Sculpture Garden” – **the new focal point would be the 17’8” x 17’8” square performance stage. The existing pool would become part of a framing device, not a focal point.** The visual and spatial relationship between the original rectangular pool and the rectangular window on the museum building is lost. **The dominant geometric form in the central gallery is no longer the rectangular pool, the dominant form would now be the square performance stage.** This is a fundamental and radical change of the basic geometries that define the sunken Sculpture Garden and its relationship to the Museum Building.

As for the insertion of stacked stone walls, as we have testified previously, they sever the primacy of the relationship between the Sculpture Garden and the Museum Building currently established by the use of aggregate concrete throughout the Sculpture Garden and on the Museum Building and Plaza Walls. At the June 6, 2019 NCP hearing Hirshhorn director Melissa Chiu, responding to a question about the use of stacked stone walls on the inner partition wall, [stated](#): “I think that the way that we’re thinking of the stone walls, that [Hiroshi] Sugimoto has kind of developed something of an expertise right now because **he’s been doing these stone walls in a number of different**

architectural projects, especially in Japan, is that they're like his curatorial intervention, if you like (emphasis added)."

This is both revealing and troubling, as director Chiu suggests that **Mr. Sugimoto's concept does not grow organically from the unique minimalist Bunshaft and Collins design, but rather it is being forced onto the Sculpture Garden.**

Other justifications provided by Hirshhorn and Smithsonian representatives have been vague and ill-defined. The [explanation](#) by Hirshhorn director Melissa Chiu at the October 7, 2020 Section 106 meeting was notable for being circuitous (and for defining the stacked stone walls as being "pre-modern" and therefore an adverse effect).

Now, for the first time since the inaugural Section 106 presentation in April 2019, acoustics are cited as a reason for using stacked stone walls. The Hirshhorn avers that the stacked stone walls are necessary to obviate the anomalous acoustics associated with the current aggregate concrete walls. According to acousticians we consulted, who reviewed the Supplemental Narrative and the March 10 presentation, the justifications presented are overly broad and thin on specifics. First, the Hirshhorn provides no differentiation between the acoustical requirements of different types of performances, performance art and other events and how each type would be affected, rather they are all indiscriminately lumped together. We have been advised that it's naïve to say that one surface needs to change when, in fact, every surface needs to be examined. There are other factors, too: the sophistication of the sound systems; the skills of the sound technicians; the ability to focus sound in specific directions; the space between the inner partition wall and the performance stage (better sound quality would result from having the stage immediately in front of the wall, which is not possible here because of the presence of the reflecting pool); etc. Additional surfaces to be considered include the faces of the stairs and the drained new pool, among others; each have surface areas that potentially create acoustical anomalies. This raises at least two related questions. How many variables are there that could be controlled other than changing the inner partition wall's design? How do we get around this newly identified problem without making material changes that fundamentally alter this work of art?

Consulting architect Felix Ade stated: "Our studies have found that the new shape of the wall will improve the acoustics by 90% and over what currently would exist with the current wall." The acousticians we consulted said this statement provides absolutely no indication of what's being measured, let alone any benchmarks for analysis. **Consequently, these studies cited by Mr. Ade should be made publicly available before this project goes to NCPC and the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA)** so that the assertions by Hirshhorn and Smithsonian officials and their consultants can be independently verified by acousticians, particularly those with experience in designing outdoor performance spaces.

Ultimately, however, the validity of the Hirshhorn's justifications for and insistence on the stacked stone walls is fundamentally undercut by the threat leveled by Hiroshi Sugimoto in a [January 11, 2021 interview](#) with the *Art Newspaper* concerning the use of stacked stone walls. He said:

"If you cannot accept this key part of the redesign—I do everything 100% and I would have to withdraw from the redesign," Sugimoto says of the stones.

It was revealing that when asked about this threat neither Hirshhorn deputy director Jaya Kaveeshwar nor consulting architect Mr. Ade refuted or denied that the threat had been made, instead they deflected. Here are their responses:

JAYA KAVEESHWAR, HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN DEPUTY DIRECTOR
“Actually, I’ll begin by addressing that comment and I just want to say that as we’ve seen Mr. Sugimoto and the entire design team and the Hirshhorn and the Smithsonian team have engaged in a really thorough public process that continues, in fact, we’re in the process of building a second stacked stone wall mock-up. And to the issue of user surveys and analysis, although I think Anne is right to highlight the way that we curate our exhibitions, which are different from the ways that maybe other institutions might address some type of presentation, the curation of exhibitions is really at the core of what we do. The other thing I would offer is that for both stacked stone wall mock-ups, we will have a public viewing, we will have a public consultation. In fact, we solicited detailed comments at our first stacked stone wall mock-up viewing and public consultation and we will certainly do that again. And to the issue of Mr. Sugimoto, he has been a really integral part of this public process and throughout this process we’ve seen the design of the wall in response to public consultation and comments and Mr. Sugimoto and the entire design team and the Hirshhorn and Smithsonian teams have been very responsive and are eager to continue to be responsive and engaged in this public process in the most transparent and open way. So, thank you for that feedback. I think that’s the comment that I’d like to offer. And I’ll turn it over to the panelists, as well.”

FELIX ADE, ARCHITECT, YUN ARCHITECTS

“Yeah, thank you Jay, this is correct. I think that Hiroshi Sugimoto said in the interview is that he is extremely interested and fond of stone walls, but it is clear in the entire design and the public review process we have been responsive to public comments and have as one can see in this presentation made a significant change for the pool, which I think shows that Hiroshi Sugimoto is very able to compromise and change the design based on public comments.”

Neither directly addressed the question.

We continue to believe that the Hirshhorn can address its “purpose and need” without the adverse effects to the Central Gallery and look forward to collaborating with Hirshhorn and Smithsonian representatives to that end.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of a stylized 'C' followed by a horizontal line that extends to the right.

Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR
President & CEO

cc: Melissa Chiu, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Jaya Kaveeshwar, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Sharon Park, Smithsonian Institution; Greg Bettwy, Smithsonian Institution; Richard Kurin, Smithsonian Institution; Kevin Gover, Smithsonian Institution; Jaime Loichinger,

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation; David Maloney, D.C. Historic Preservation Office; Andrew Lewis, D.C. Historic Preservation Office; Thomas Luebke, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts; Marcel Acosta; National Capital Planning Commission; Lee Webb, National Capital Planning Commission; Steve Callcott, D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board; Theo Prudon, Docomomo U.S.; Liz Waytkus, Docomomo U.S.; Kirby Vining, Committee of 100 on the Federal City; Rebecca Miller, D.C. Preservation League; Betsy Merritt, National Trust for Historic Preservation; Bill Brown, Association of Oldest Inhabitants.