

# The Committee of 100

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on the Federal City



March 30, 2021

Melissa Chiu, Director  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden  
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**RE: Response to March 10, 2021, 106 Consultation on Hirshhorn Museum Sculpture Garden Restoration and Rehabilitation Proposal**

Director Chiu:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment further on the Smithsonian Institution's concept plan for the restoration and rehabilitation of the historic Hirshhorn Museum Sculpture Garden. **The Committee of 100 on the Federal City** does so as a Consulting Party under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (54 USC §300101 et seq).

As we allowed in our previous letters to you and in testimony before the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), we applaud many aspects of the overall plan. However, we continue to oppose two elements which we believe affect adversely this historically significant modern landscape. These being: 1) nominal destruction of the Garden's historically-significant 1974 Reflecting Pool; and, 2) the proposed introduction into the Garden of new and design-inappropriate "stacked stone" walls. We concur with your argument that the historic Sculpture Garden must grow, evolve, and change in response to "new" Institution and visitor needs and purposes. However, we assert also that the change must not be accomplished at the cost of major, historically-significant, elements of the Garden's design. Based on the March 10 meeting and the new material provided in advance, we provide the following thoughts and/or suggestions on these two points in hopes we may yet convince you of the worthiness of better stewardship of the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden.

**New Performance Space:** As proposed, the addition of a new, multi-purpose reflecting pool/performance space in the Central Gallery, effectively obliterates or inappropriately sublimates the original, historic 1974 Reflecting Pool. The new construction would destroy not only the historic design relationship between the existing Pool and the Central Gallery space but also the important visual relationship between the 1974 Pool and the large, north facing window/ balcony on the museum drum itself. Both, highly significant historic design elements. We do not oppose the proposed new performance space programming for the garden – far from it. However, there is nothing in the idea that cannot be satisfactorily accommodated within the existing space without affecting adversely the 1974 Pool. A well-designed, removable stage on the existing Central Gallery grass or a new pavement-defined performance space within the same are much less destructive approaches than the current proposal – particularly given the infrequency of anticipated "events" described in the documentation proposal. Too, as removable chairs are evident in the proposal renderings, adding or removing chairs on the lawn or pavement are equally viable approaches when performances are scheduled. Finally, if tiered or raked seating is desired, the lawn can be reshaped into a modest "sunken garden" of grass or grass and paving. The challenge is easily solved, new programming goals met, all without creating an adverse impact on the extant historic Reflecting Pool and Garden.

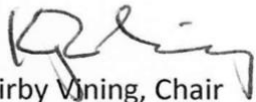
**Stacked Stone Walls:** While doubtless impressive and compelling, Mr. Sugimoto's signature stone walls are simply the wrong material choice for this highly-significant, mid-century, Brutalist landscape. The spare, interlocking shuttered concrete "rooms" of the historic design provide not only an appropriate setting for a world-class Modern sculpture collection but create a material and design "dialogue" between the garden and the museum building itself. Too, shuttered concrete is the material choice of the original garden designers – which should be

respected. We were somewhat taken aback by the Institution's rationale requested by NCPC for using rusticated stone in the Garden. The logic seemed highly subjective and arguably debatable: e.g., "shuttered concrete negatively impacts art; stone evokes stronger human response; modern sculpture looks better against stone." Likewise, providing photographs of stone walls on or near the National Mall provided little compelling rationale. And finally, the argument that, "stacked stone has better acoustic qualities than shuttered concrete" is professionally debatable even in an enclosed theater much less *en plein air* as is the case here where nearby buildings, wind, plant material, traffic, and even weather can affect outdoor performance acoustics. And while the brief 1-page, **a'kustiks** report summary provided consulting parties was interesting, it should not be taken as authoritative without supporting and juried research data adjusted for environmental effects per above. Regrettably, none of the rationale requested by NCPC for the use of stacked stone is persuasive. Again, there is little doubt that the stone walls (if installed) will be attractive and popular. However, the fact remains that the material is historically inappropriate to the historic Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden.

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Restoration and Rehabilitation Proposal is, in many ways, a strong concept affecting a national-class landscape and collection – a project to which the Committee of 100 would like to lend its enthusiastic support. If any cultural institution understands the arguments of preserving the material and design integrity of the historic Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden, it must surely be the Smithsonian Institution. We trust you will consider these comments carefully.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide the Committee of 100 on the Federal City's comments on this important project of national interest. If we may provide clarification or answer any questions, please contact us. We appreciate your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,



Kirby Vining, Chair

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City

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