



OLIN

MEMORANDUM

TO: Billie Tsien – TWBTA (billie@twba.com)

PROJECT: Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden

SUBJECT: CFA revised submission for sculpture garden

SUBMITTED BY: Laurie Olin

DATE: 6 July 2021

COPIES TO: Thomas Luebke – CFA (tluebke@cfa.gov)
File

Conclusions:

I have reviewed the submission for the revitalization of the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden of 5/16/2119 and the more recent one, which is to be reviewed on 7/17/2121, and the CFA minutes from first (2019) presentation, as well as the letter of comments to the Smithsonian and its Design Team in response to the first presentation.

In my view the Commission was correct to approve the design proposal and to suggest several refinements and further study of a few aspects. The design proposal, if carried out with the refinements such as are in the applicants new 2021 presentation, is a vast improvement over the current existing scheme for several reasons discussed below.

There has apparently been some controversy over process, and statements made regarding what may have been omissions in the evaluation of the existing scheme from 1981, however, they do not negate the merits of the proposed scheme nor the CFA's decision to proceed. I also discuss this below.

A review of context and hopefully some perspective:

There have been gardens with sculpture for thousands of years – some handsome, even beautiful, and many not. There have also been sunken gardens for thousands of years. Again, some delightful and some unfortunate. In the twentieth century numerous museums in Europe and America created landscapes, some of which can be considered gardens, expressly for the exhibition of sculpture. In the latter part of the 20th century a number of artists in a desire to move out of the commercial world of galleries or what were considered constraints in museums created outdoor environments, commonly referred to as 'site art, land art, or site sculpture'. Some of this work was stunning and is still highly regarded. Some was amateurish landscape design, or worse.

The Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden combined a number of these typologies, and with the current proposal changes it to somewhat of a hybrid combination of all them all, and as such has become understandably controversial. The first design version of this sunken garden for sculpture was created by architect



Gordon Bunshaft and the staff of SOM in 1974. This was after his proposal for a large cross axial reflecting basin extending the width of the National Mall was not implemented. This first version of the Hirshhorn garden included a linear reflecting basin, an underground passage from the museum on the south, and three flights of stairs from the mall level emphasizing a north south axis perpendicular to the east west orientation of the mall and sunken garden. The largest flight of steps was screened by an intermediate wall made of textured concrete, similar to the retaining walls of the garden, and was near and parallel to the basin. The pavement was of gravel, and there was one lone tree. By the time it was built the basin had been reduced in size. This outdoor room was unbearably hot and blindingly bright in summer, was deemed dismal in winter, and highly criticized.. Gordon Bunshaft, designer of the museum building, had earlier collaborated with the sculptor Isamu Noguchi on a series of outdoor garden rooms. Those at Connecticut General insurance Company headquarters in Connecticut were not sunken, but two others – those at Yale’s Beinecke Library and Chase Manhattan Bank’s wall street tower were sunken below adjacent terraces. All contained sculptural works by Noguchi and are highly successful as works of art – individually and tout ensemble – and environments to be viewed, walked about, and seen from different vantages, but not entered. SOM’s attempt to make such a garden on their own without an artist or landscape architect was clearly not as successful.

In 1981 a considerably revised version was opened. It was largely the design of a well-respected landscape architect, Lester Collins, who economically retained the main architectural elements, introduced bands of lawn, paved residual paths with brick, and added a variety of trees, shrubs, and vines. Although nearly a decade prior to the passage of the American Disabilities Act, Collins revised the stairs and provided access by ramp. This design has been in place for the past thirty + years and has experienced normal wear and tear, slow but steady erosion and deterioration, growth, death, and replacement of some plants, along with incremental changes due to maintenance practices common in public parks, gardens, and plazas. For decades, this garden has been viewed by many (and in fairness, not just by figures associated with the museum) as dysfunctional, worn, tired, out of date programmatically, and in need of refurbishment if not major transformation.

For what it is worth, notes I made after meeting with Rusty Powell, Director of the National Gallery of Art, on 5 February 1993 at the National Gallery when he asked me to make a proposal to design a sculpture garden west of the Pope building, are telling. I asked why he and the Gallery wanted to embark upon such a project when the Hirshhorn had done one across the Mall. His response, I noted, was that it was “A project nobody likes. Too many people involved. Hirshhorn is a pit”.

It is a well-known fact about landscapes and gardens that they are by nature dynamic not static, and their long-term survival nearly always involves change to some degree. Despite rhetoric associated with preservation and conservation, The Secretary of Interior’s Guidelines for Preservation (etc.), a creation of the National Park Service in the late 1960s, while a powerful and effective aid in the survival and care of myriad buildings and structures, has proved more difficult, less helpful, even controversial in terms of landscape in the view of several distinguished professionals. National and international conferences in recent decades have addressed some of the dilemmas associated with the topic of landscape preservation and a range of landscape preservation controversies, but it is a topic that continues to unfold and evolve.

Then in 1991, a design developed by landscape architect James Urban was implemented around the base of the circular museum building that radically transformed a wall enclosed square paved courtyard – a space also unloved and unwelcoming in which the museum had been exhibiting sculpture. Urban removed concrete paving, replacing it with panels of lawn and numerous canopy trees providing shade,



thereby creating ambience, more spatial definition, with differentiation of the radiating trays of grass – all providing complimentary forms, color, and texture to Bunshaft's minimalist suspended concrete drum. This also provided a much-improved situation for display of large-scale sculpture, whether permanently or temporarily. While this project must certainly have come to the CFA at the time, I am unaware of the discussion. There was no outcry, and a general sigh of relief. Which brings us to the current proposal, which is simply to, once again, seek to improve the situation set in motion by the original Bunshaft scheme as already modified substantially in 1981.

Hiroshi Sugimoto is a distinguished and respected artist of international fame, who, in addition to noteworthy sculpture and photography, has produced exemplary site design works in the past, and whose aesthetic views and work deserve careful attention and respect.

Faye Harwell is a highly respected landscape architect, who has led a professional practice in the Washington DC region for the past 35 years that is noted for its ecological and historic expertise. She also knows what she is doing when engaged in matters of the public realm and trust. The rest of the design team are all distinguished in their respective disciplines.

The proposal makes substantial changes in composition and both spatial and material character that are bold and sophisticated. Redundant narrow strips of turf are eliminated and replaced with one simple rectangle of sufficient size and proportion to be useful and flexible for exhibition or performance events. The narrow, rather mean (given the context of the mall and its other spaces and structures) basin is enhanced and made to appear more generous in keeping with its context and purpose (reflection and the delight of water with its inevitable movement of ripples and light) but also more flexible. Many of the mundane and problematic concrete walls are supplanted by simple, and engaging rough stone walls, fashioned in a proven manner that is appealing in itself, but has for centuries also proven to be a superb foil for refined art of a wide variety and scale, whether in Asia, Europe, or America. Versions of such walls may be seen in the work of internationally admired modernist architects (Breuer, Sert, Noyes) as well as in numerous historic Japanese gardens, villas, and palaces. From the drawings and photos submitted these have been very carefully considered and proportioned and will be superbly installed. Finally, the proposal includes a rich and carefully considered palette of trees, shrubs, vines, and herbaceous ground covers that will provide physical and visual relief in the high summer, and seasonal interest and pleasure year-round. A handsome stone pavement replaces the brick.

The merits of the scheme in terms of environmental performance are worthy and made manifest in supporting material of the application. In a way, I shouldn't think that this topic is particularly a matter for consideration by a Commission that is intended to evaluate the artistic merit of things, except to the degree that the aesthetic nature and properties of a proposal are harmful to the environment or wellbeing of the public, physically or socially (such as causes flooding, is abusive to a particular group or individual, etc.) except as in this case and others brought to the CFA the degree to which choices relating to the movement of water, choice of plants, character of light and shade so engendered are in fact part of the aesthetic one must consider in evaluating the art of a landscape design. Again, this scheme passes with flying colors.

The Commission and CFA responded to the earlier proposal (2019) with comments, noting concerns and suggesting possible modifications, which seem understandable and reasonable to me. It appears that most and likely all of these have been addressed. The Commission should, however, go through them to make sure it is sufficiently satisfied – I may have missed something.

Finally, the concern regarding process in dealing with a historic public feature, and establishment of a 'correct' period of significance for the existing garden (Secretary of Interior/preservation language), and



particularly the importance of Lester Collins and this particular of his. First, I do not believe this garden has ever been listed as of any historic significance, in large part because it has never been regarded highly as a design. It has been seen as a problematic place to exhibit and view sculpture. It is, as has been noted, correct that Collins was for a time the Chairman of the Department of Landscape Architecture and well-loved teacher at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University in the post-war years and had a long and successful professional career. His most important work was probably that which he participated in with the Pittsburgh firm Simonds and Simonds, and later several private estate gardens, most significantly that of Mr. Hirshhorn. While there are numerous public park and garden spaces in Washington DC that he did, none are really exceptional, and some are quite hum-drum, a problem as much to do with their situation and scope as his talent. In my view, his work is competent but not remarkable, and suffers from the instrumentality of the field of landscape architecture at the time. It is a functional design in a manner as understood prior to the ecological movement and lacking as a work of art such as the best landscape designs and gardens have been through history. Looking clearly at Collins redesign of the Hirshhorn sculpture garden, one could say the biggest problem is that he was too considerate of Bunshaft's scheme and its drawbacks and did not make bolder changes. But, given his gentlemanly manner, and the design ethos in the field at the time, he did a lot and what he could.

The biggest problem with historic preservation in America today is our reluctance to make qualitative judgements and a lack of skill in making adjustments, layering, editing and working with hybrid solutions to complex problems, and especially historic environments. An all or nothing attitude pervades both the development community and preservation. Too often our society and its instruments want and implement simple answers to complicated problems to our detriment. Conversely in other parts of the world, numerous professionals have made careers out of sensitive additions and alterations, insertions and overlays to historic buildings and spaces, parks and gardens, with the result of a rich palimpsest of historic accretion. One cannot enter a park in Paris that hasn't had multiple hands revise, alter, and add to it – in some cases over four centuries. We must learn how to do it. We can't keep clinging and fighting to preserve everything regardless of quality for fear of losing our past, nor tear everything down so as to have fresh and new things of our own era. We should and must have some of both – but of the highest quality when we have an opportunity to do so. Which means that committees invested with the responsibility of making value judgements (not quantitative ones) should do so. Therefore, in my opinion, Lester Collins' design for the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden is not in the same league as his best work such as Innisfree or his community planning. It also is not in the same league as other sunken gardens with sculpture in Gordon Bunshaft's oeuvre.

It is unfortunate that egos were bruised, and respected figures somewhat ignored by the process earlier in this project, and that prominent individuals, including some of the project proponents were impolite – apologies and cooling off by all are probably in order; meanwhile one must stick to the task at hand.

The project as currently proposed by Sugimoto, Harwell, et al, is far superior to what has existed adjacent to the Hirshhorn Museum and the National Mall until now, and if implemented will add a worthy layer to those that will inevitably remain imbedded in the situation. The sculpture garden will become a sequential and combined work of Bunshaft, Collins, and Sugimoto, created through time, one far more interesting than any of them could have done alone.