

To: Members of the US Commission of Fine Arts
CC: Thomas Luebke, Secretary, The US Commission of Fine Arts
From: Elizabeth K. Meyer, FASLA, PLA
Merrill D. Peterson Professor of Landscape Architect, University of Virginia
Subject: Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden
Date: 10 July 2021

I write to clarify some public statements made by the Hirshhorn staff and/or consultants about my support for the proposed changes to the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden. It has come to my attention that remarks I made during a 16 May 2019 CFA meeting, during which time I was a Commissioner (2011-2019), have been used without context leading to the impression that I endorse the current designs. I do not.

When the Hirshhorn's consultants, Hiroshi Sugimoto of Sugimoto Studio and Faye Harwell of Rhodesside Harwell, presented a conceptual design two years ago, the [National Register nomination](#) (submitted by Sharon Park, associate director of the Architectural History and Historic Preservation division (AHHP) for the Smithsonian Institution, to the DC Historic Preservation Office) had suggested that the "period of significance" for this modernist landscape was 1974, the year that the museum and sculpture garden opened. This fact weighed heavy on my mind during the CFA discussion and as I made comments. So did a second fact mentioned by Hirshhorn director Melissa Chiu. When the sculpture garden was designed the Hirshhorn as an institution, and the art world, had a particular conception of the sculpture and art it was collecting and exhibiting. Fifty years ago, the sculpture garden design could not have anticipated the spatial requirements of late 20th c. and early 21st c. performance art, video art, relational art, multi-species co-produced art, etc. As I did not know much about the landscape architect Lester Collins in 2019 (as many of you know the recorded and written history of garden and landscape history is a much younger field than art history and architectural history), and I knew well the poor condition of the sculpture garden because of deferred maintenance, I sensed that design changes might be in order.

Despite the 1974 "period of significance," my public comments during conceptual design suggested that the Hirshhorn landscape be interpreted as a palimpsest of numerous additions/alterations by Bunshaft, Collins and Urban between 1974-1991. As a landscape architect with education and professional experience planning and designing changes to significant historic sites—from the UVA Academical Village and Wellesley College to the St Louis Gateway Arch Grounds, I do not consider design and preservation as separate endeavors. I believe a good landscape architect, architect and site artist *reads the landscape* through a double gaze for landscapes are simultaneously living systems and cultural artifacts that evolve over time. In order to curate change in a landscape, I have found pitting the two ends of a continuum "preserve everything old" or "change everything" impoverished positions. Every landscape designer, especially those involved in the public realm, works on a canvas that is already marked, and can be decoded, before it is scraped, inlaid, overlaid, subtracted, altered.

Yes, I did endorse careful, thoughtful changes to the Collins' landscape additions *if based on research that still needed to be done*. That research was ultimately done by [Robinson & Associates, Inc.](#), because in February 2020, the "period of significance" was expanded to include the Collins' design additions. It should be noted that Collins respected Bunshaft's artistic/design intent by retaining the aggregate concrete throughout the sculpture garden, and the original reflecting pool unencumbered by additional water features or similar distracting interventions. He did so while changing the spatial sequence into the sunken garden; accommodating the disabled graciously at a time when that was not required by law; inserting canopy trees to improve the urban microclimate; and shaping the

garden's ceiling with canopy tree species that had striking sculptural branching structures resonating with the purpose of the garden and provided much needed shade for visitors. Along with the expansion of the period of significance, an additional marker of Collins' significance took place since the CFA approved the sculpture garden concept design. In September 2019, Innisfree in Millbrook, New York, a 185-acre site designed by Lester Collins, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, adding further necessary context to the discussion of his contributions at the Hirshhorn.

If the “period of significance” had been 1981 versus 1974, my May 2019 comments would have been different. In addition to asking for more archival research into Collin’s involvement, I would have called for the Collin’s design to have more weight as a layer in the redesign. The exact degree of change, and the character of the resulting palimpsest, would be decided during the design process, as the intentions of the 1981 design were weighed relative to the programming desires of the current Smithsonian staff and aesthetic predispositions of their consultant. In brief, the available knowledge and conditions have changed since I last saw this project two years ago. My comments in 2019 would have been different if I had been made more aware of Collins' significance by the client and their consultants. My comments in 2019 cannot be construed as ongoing support for the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden redesign.

Additionally, I am disheartened when reading recent publicly available documents—articles in the art and architecture press, and the MOA—to learn that the Smithsonian and their consultant have neither embraced their work as a new layer in this landscape palimpsest, nor viewed the design process as a conversation with the site and its histories. Rather, the designer of the garden has said “To make my art I make all the decisions by myself.” (WSJ April 28, 2021; downloaded May 2, 2021). Through this lens, the changes made to the existing site are not part of a design ethos (design as site interpretation); they are willful decisions by an artist who feels his work should not be modified through the normal public conversations that take place in the public realm. This “artistic” vision is then coupled with a legal document, a draft MOA between the Smithsonian and the DC SHPO, the ACHP and the NCPC, describing the adverse effects to an important designed cultural landscape located within the National Mall that require compensation through six pages of “minimization measures.”

Because of the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden's location on the National Mall, one of our most significant cultural landscapes, and because the false dichotomy between the re-design or preservation of modernist landscapes is not unique in Washington DC (e.g., the Pershing Park/WWI Memorial), I urge the Commission to take particular care in reviewing this case. The entire Commission has turned over since the Hirshhorn Museum sculpture garden's concept review in 2019. The determination of the sculpture garden's period of significance was changed since that time to include the work of Lester Collins, one of the most important mid 20th c. design educators (Harvard GSD 1945-1953) and practitioners (Simonds and Simonds, 1955-1970).

What changes did the design consultants make to their 2019 concept submittal in response to their newfound awareness of the significance of Collins' work? Given that change of status, might it be appropriate for this review to be a revised concept and not a final review? Since the CFA is not a historic preservation review board, but a design review board, what criteria are you using to evaluate this redesigned landscape with many layers? And finally, as a newly constituted board without a landscape architect, please appreciate that the particular comments you make about this project will signal a message about the importance of the DC cultural landscape to future CFA applicants and their design teams. I wish my former Commissioners and the newly appointed Commissions the best as you deliberate on this and future matters.