July 12, 2021

Ms. Billie Tsien, Chair  
U.S. Commission of Fine Arts  
401 F Street NW, Suite 312  
Washington, DC 20001-2728

Dear Commission Chair Tsien and Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed revitalization of the Sculpture Garden at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Since COVID-19 related restrictions preclude us from testifying during the hearing on July 15, we are submitting the following comments that we hope the Commissioners will have the opportunity to review in advance of their tour of the Sculpture Garden on July 14.

Since this is the first time that all the Commissioners will consider this project, we have attempted to summarize some of the key issues that have been raised during parallel reviews before the National Capital Planning Commission (“NCPC”) and pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (“Section 106”). While the purview and responsibilities of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (“CFA”) are separate and distinct, we believe issues raised at NCPC and during the Section 106 reviews are relevant.

Fortunately, the CFA is independent. By contrast the Smithsonian is managing the federal Section 106 review of the Sculpture Garden revitalization.

We are pleased that the Hirshhorn’s current leadership, particularly director Melissa Chiu, and the Smithsonian have undertaken the arduous task of revitalizing the Sculpture Garden, which is prominently located on the National Mall, one of the nation’s most visible and visited cultural landscapes. Indeed, there is much to like about the plans by artist and designer Hiroshi Sugimoto who was selected to work on this project following his successful 2018 renovation of the museum building’s lobby. We appreciate the need for greater flexibility to accommodate programming for performance art and other needs.

The Hirshhorn is a remarkable and symbiotic work of modernist architecture and landscape architecture created by architect Gordon Bunshaft in 1974. In 1981, an overlay to the Sculpture Garden by landscape architect Lester Collins opened; it met with Bunshaft’s approval. Importantly, the Sculpture Garden (and the entire museum campus) is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places and part of the National Mall Historic District.

We ask the Commissioners to keep the following in mind: Bunshaft unified the campus [a] materially with aggregate concrete on the museum building, the walls of the plaza that surrounds the building and throughout the Sculpture Garden, and, [b] as noted in National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, through the link between the Sculpture Garden’s reflecting pool and the rectangular window on the building façade (“This pool maintains a strong visual relationship with the glazed recess of the museum building’s north balcony, which is similar in size” – see image on next page).
Key Issues and Questions

The exceptions to our enthusiasm for the Sculpture Garden’s revitalization, and the only two issues we and other Sculpture Garden advocates have consistently raised before NCPC and in the Section 106 reviews, concern: [a] the introduction of stacked stone walls, especially in what the Hirshhorn calls the Central Gallery, and [b] the addition of a new U-shaped pool (with raked seating when drained). Both are major interventions into this carefully calibrated modernist composition of landscape architecture. The stacked stone is a new materiality, which the Hirshhorn calls “pre-modern,” that would only be used in the Sculpture Garden, creating an insular design vocabulary that separates it from the museum building and plaza. Similarly, the new pool would greatly obfuscate the relationship between the original reflecting pool and the rectangular window on the building façade, especially when it is filled as the new focal point would be a 17’8” x 17’8” square performance stage. Again, there would be a new insular design in which a square performance stage would be largely enclosed within a square water feature. Both changes fundamentally alter the symbiotic relationship between the Sculpture Garden and museum building; the Sculpture Garden would become something else, which seems in conflict with the institution’s own messaging.

In a March 11, 1982 memo, the museum’s executive officer, Nancy Kirkpatrick, wrote:

The Sculpture Garden, integral to the Museum’s mission, is the only garden specifically referred to in any public law pertaining to the Smithsonian Institution (P.L 89-788 "to provide for the establishment of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Museum Sculpture Garden, and for other purposes.") It is not a by-product or an afterthought; and the very name of our museum indicates its importance.

Here are several questions we wish to raise about these interventions into this modernist landscape:
• Are these proposals the only design responses capable of addressing the Hirshhorn’s stated needs, especially for accommodating performance art?
• Are there other ways to accomplish their objectives without fundamentally altering the Sculpture Garden and its relationship to the museum building?
• Does the current proposal respect Gordon Bunshaft’s artistic intent for this modernist design?

Per this last question, when Collins proposed introducing internal lateral ramps within the site and other elements, Bunshaft was apparently concerned. According to a September 12, 1977 memo written by former Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley about the Collins redesign of the Sculpture Garden, the Secretary wrote that he “spoke to Gordon Bunshaft today about the new design.” He went on: “[Bunshaft] said that he hoped that the materials used … would consist of the same kind of aggregate concrete … which occurs in the main building.”

The Hirshhorn has put forward several and changing reasons for their proposed interventions. We provide a sampling of what we expect may presented to the Commission.

Uninspiring

According to the Hirshhorn: “The existing Garden is … uninspiring to performance artists.” Unfortunately, Officials provided no evidence to support this statement.

The Introduction of Stacked Stones Walls

The current state of the Sculpture Garden is lamentable. As any visitor can see, the severe discoloration of the aggregate concrete, which should be a neutral backdrop, is not only unsightly, but it also competes for attention with the artwork on display. The viewer’s eye can’t help but be drawn to the backdrop marred by Alkali-Silica Reaction, efflorescence, surface accumulation, mottled colors, and other surface anomalies. As with the neutral white walls of the museum’s interior galleries, the neutral backdrop of the aggregate concrete walls is meant to recede allowing for optimal, unimpeded viewing of the artwork.

The Hirshhorn proposes to insert stacked stone walls, particularly in the Central Gallery. As Hirshhorn director Chiu has said, Sugimoto has “been doing these stone walls in a number of different architectural projects, especially in Japan … they're like his curatorial intervention.” Is this an organic design response to the site? Are these “pre-modern” walls an appropriate intervention into this modernist campus?

In a March 11, 2021 Wall Street Journal review, “The Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden Redesign: Paving Paradise,” Michael Lewis wrote that the original concrete aggregate wall surface “forms an ideal setting for looking at sculpture outdoors, a neutral background against which the sculpture practically pops forward.” By contrast, the “agitated surfaces” of the stacked stone walls “clash with the lines of any sculpture displayed before it.”

If the decayed state of the existing aggregate concrete walls is a visual distraction, don’t the “agitated surfaces” of stacked stone threaten to permanently exacerbate the problem?
Visual Precedents

Over the past two years the Hirshhorn has included photographs to suggest precedents for using stacked stone in the Sculpture Garden. These include: “a well-known photograph of Joseph Hirshhorn and artist Henry Moore outdoors at [Hirshhorn’s Greenwich, CT estate] Round Hill together, standing next to Moore’s Falling Warrior (now a centerpiece of the Hirshhorn's collection) with a low stacked stone wall visible behind”; a stone wall incorporated into a residential design project by modernist landscape architect Dan Kiley; Morse and Stiles Colleges at Yale University by Eero Saarinen; and, the Eliot Noyes House in New Canaan, CT (now a center for contemporary art).

The stone walls at the Kiley, Saarinen and Noyes examples were all original to these respective designs and not later interventions. And Hirshhorn lived in a French Normandy-style mansion (recently sold by Tommy Hilfiger) and not a modernist work. Hence, these examples are irrelevant.

The Hirshhorn has also presented photographs of stacked stone walls at landscapes along the National Mall – as with the examples cited above, these National Mall precedents are also irrelevant.

Acoustics

The Hirshhorn avers that the stacked stone walls are necessary to obviate the anomalous acoustics associated with the current aggregate concrete walls (this is a relatively new concern introduced by the institution at a March 10, 2021 public meeting). Their 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.” According to the acousticians we consulted this statement provides absolutely no indication of what’s being measured, let alone any benchmarks for analysis, and the justifications presented in the Hirshhorn’s materials are overly broad and thin on specifics. TCLF requested the studies cited by Ade to be made public. In response, the Hirshhorn posted a summary of an acoustical “analysis that was completed as part of schematic design in Fall 2019.” The “acoustical observations” by the Norwalk, CT-based firm Akustiks discuss the ability of stacked stone walls to better offset “acoustical reflections” that could be perceived by listeners as being “harsh.”

While the analysis by Akustiks is not inaccurate, it is fundamentally inadequate. 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 its 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 has 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?
The Central Gallery

The Hirshhorn proposes to replace the existing aggregate concrete inner partition wall with stacked stone and to introduce a new U-shaped pool (that would feature raked seating when drained). Here are some issues we ask the Commissioners to consider.

In March 2021, the institution noted the following “existing condition”: “The role of the Central Gallery as a focal point in the Garden is also diminished. The space functions as one in a series of galleries for visitors to pass through rather than as a focal point for the Sculpture Garden.” This a programming issue and not a design issue. The Central Gallery is “one in a series of galleries” because its being programmed that way. That’s not an inherent fault of the space, nevertheless institution officials suggest the landscape is to blame.

The Reflecting Pool

Another “existing challenge”: “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.”

Once again, officials provide no evidence to support the statement that the reflecting pool is “overwhelmed by the complex landscape and scale of contemporary art.” In fact, the addition of the second pool means the Hirshhorn would fail to make the existing pool “a focal point for the Sculpture Garden” – it would instead be the 17’8” x 17’8” square performance stage (see below). The existing pool would become part of a framing device, not a focal point. As noted earlier, 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 would no longer the rectangular pool.

The original reflecting pool would become part of a framing device for the stage.
Maintenance of the existing reflecting pool has been a challenge for the Smithsonian (and it looks forlorn in its current empty state). How will the institution deal with the more complex demands of the new U-shaped pool?

**The West Garden Lawn or Gallery**

As part of the revitalization, a new, 90-foot-long grass covered space would be created for performances, performance art, the installation of large-scale sculpture and other activities. According to the *Hirshhorn*, this space could accommodate up to 400 seated guests. If a new flexible programming space is being created in the West Gallery, why is a second one in the Central Gallery, which calls for drastic design interventions, necessary? What are the deficiencies of the West Gallery that make the interventions in the Central Gallery essential? As the Wall Street Journal’s Lewis wrote, the current Central Gallery would be “sacrificed for program space that will be used for a few hours a week, and only during certain months of the year.”

**West Garden and Flexible Program**

The West Gallery could accommodate 400 seated guests for performances and other activities.

**Conclusion**

We are supportive of the revitalization efforts but have serious concerns about two design interventions that would fundamentally alter Gordon Bunshaft’s artistic vision, which was respected by landscape architect Lester Collins, whose own contribution is now eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. We hope this recognition of Collins, made since the only other time the CFA considered this project, would offer an opportunity to reconsider the concept approval. We also hope Commissioners will have an opportunity to closely examine whether the current proposals are the only design responses capable of addressing the Hirshhorn’s stated needs. We believe that implementing the existing plans represents a missed opportunity to find new life and purpose for a Sculpture Garden that is meaningful to so many and that change can be managed to
accommodate the institution’s needs without disrupting Bunshaft’s artistic vision and the campus’ symbiosis.

Sincerely,

Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR
President & CEO