Concerned Citizens for Dumbarton Oaks

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DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF ZONING
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Chairperson and Board Members
Board of Zoning Adjustment
441 4th Street
Suite 210
Washington, DC

March 9, 2000

Dear Chairperson and Members,

The reason for this letter is to bring to your attention the concerns that many of us have, not only in Washington but across the country, about Harvard's proposal to build an underground library beneath the North Vista, or possibly the South Lawn of the Dumbarton Oaks garden. Regarded as a masterpiece of garden design and as a part of our national legacy, it was designed by Beatrix Farrand, one of the most distinguished landscape architects of her generation and the only female founding member of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

We ask you as a member of the Board of Zoning Adjustment to scrutinize with great care the application before you and that you weigh its impact not only in relation to the neighborhood but the potential threat this proposal poses to a site of acknowledged national significance. We do not deny the need to expand; we believe the siting of the building is wrong since there is suitable alternative space within the property holdings of Dumbarton Oaks..

The concept plans and a model of the underground building beneath the North Vista have already been prepared. In the face of opposition to this location, another site beneath the South Lawn is now under study by the design team. Both sites meet the needs expressed by the Director for contiguity between the scholars and their sources. But both sites present a major intervention into the heart of the garden. The potential damage and impact of this large structure on the character and historic landscape

BZA
Case No. 16555
Exhibit No. 28

Board of Zoning Adjustment
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could be devastating.

The issue of an underground building remaining permanently waterproof cannot be guaranteed. Time and corrosion take their toll and inevitably there will be a time when the roof will leak, an underground pipe has to repaired and the garden will be dug up again. There are many examples of failed underground buildings; the Sackler Museum here in Washington, DC, the De Witt Museum of Decorative Arts of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the gymnasium of Georgetown University to mention a just a few. I refer you to the enclosed letter from Professor Jack Sullivan of University of Maryland which describes the problems relating to the problems of underground structures and roof top plantings. Despite the assurances by the Director and the architect that the garden, its walls and its trees will be restored exactly as it is today, there are many unforeseen risks. It is optimistic to assume that a roof garden, which is what it will be, can ever have the same character and viability as it does today. This is an enormous and complex task. Once the damage to the garden is done, it cannot be reversed.

This was a misguided proposal when it was thwarted 25 years ago and it still is a misguided proposal. There can be only one acceptable site for the expansion and that is the open area behind the Fellows building on S Street, which is outside the designed garden. This site offers an excellent oportunity to enhance a neglected area with a handsome building in a garden setting .

Enclosed is a Petition of protest to President Rudenstine with well over 100 signatures of landscape architects, historians,preservationists,architects and concerned citizens, from all over the country, who value and cherish what they regard as an important cultural resource. I should mention that when this project was scheduled for review by the DC Historic Preservation Review Board last February, I was told by an officer of the Board that in 15 years they had never received as many letters expressing opposition to a project.

Dumbarton Oaks is known and loved by the public for its garden and not as a centre for the study of Byzantine and pre-Columbian culture. It is highly valued by scholars, design professionals and public who visit it by the thousands annually. To proceed with a project that would deface a cultural and historic landmark would seriously jeopardize not only

reputation of Harvard, but also of those who would grant permission to proceed.

We beg you to review, with utmost care, this ill-conceived proposal. A dispersed campus arrangement has been rejected by the Director as a "programmatic liability" arguing that scholars, books and objects must be contiguous. We believe there are few scholars who would not prefer to walk a short distance to an above ground library with natural light.

Therefore, we strongly urge that the open space behind the Fellows building be investigated as the appropriate alternative location and that approval for an underground building within the designed garden be denied. Thank you for your consideration

Yours sincerely,



Florence Everts,
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