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From:
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DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF ZONING
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To:
Mr.Neil Rudenstine, President
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

February 8,2000

Dear President Rudenstine,

On behalf of The American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), I would like to express concern over current proposals for the location of a library under the North Vista of the gardens at Dumbarton Oaks. ASLA believes there are alternative solutions to the location of the library and other facilities that do not threaten the historic and cultural authenticity of this most significant designed landscape. We urge you to pursue one of these alternative options.

ASLA's concern over the fate of the North Vista garden is based on several factors. The garden is one of the most important designed landscapes in the United States. Beatrix Jones Farrand, the designer, holds a special place in the history of the profession of landscape architecture both as a masterful early woman landscape architect and one of the original founders of the American Society of Landscape Architects. The North Vista has been named an ASLA Centennial Medallion site, designating it as one of the most important works of landscape architecture in the United States. ASLA is both surprised and disappointed to find that this site has not already been nominated for and received National Register status.

BZA
Case No. 16555
Exhibit No. 30

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO.16555
EXHIBIT NO.30

While it may be technically possible to reconstruct the North Vista on top of the library, ASLA is concerned that the original garden will likely never again be considered truly authentic. As a result, the garden's ability to qualify for national landmark status and protection will be threatened. ASLA must ask the question, why is such a loss so readily accepted? Would the same be true if a historic building, not a landscape, were at risk? Would anyone expect the main residence at Monticello to retain the same level of authenticity if it were razed and reconstructed? Would anyone even think of putting a library underneath the residence at Monticello?

We commend your selection of landscape architect James Urban, ASLA, a highly qualified expert in urban trees and someone who cares deeply about the Farrand garden, to join the design team. We have total confidence in his ability to protect existing vegetation and recreate conditions suitable for the establishment of new plants in a rooftop condition. However, the central question still remains - Once lost, can historic authenticity be recreated?

ASLA believes that authenticity is no less important to historic landscapes than to historic buildings. Historic landscapes are just as fragile as historic structures and require the same level of protection. While dynamic and evolving entities, historic landscapes must retain certain essential elements of physical integrity in order to remain significant.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the destruction/reconstruction of such a significant landscape will create an unacceptable precedent that could threaten other historic landscapes for years to come. The challenge of historic landscape preservation will become even greater as urban growth pressures continue to intensify.

The ASLA respectfully requests Dumbarton Oaks and Harvard University to first, complete a Cultural Landscape Report for the entire Dumbarton Oaks garden in cooperation with the National Park Service to determine the full extent of the historic significance of the site. The Report should be completed before any further decisions are made concerning the location and nature of the library design. Secondly, while we acknowledge that

Dumbarton Oaks has real needs for facility expansion and improvement, we encourage you to seriously consider an alternative site that would not threaten the historic Farrand garden.

ASLA urges you to do everything possible to preserve and protect the historic gardens of Dumbarton Oaks for generations to come. Dumbarton Oaks is considered an international mecca for the study of historic landscapes. Of all institutions in the world, Dumbarton Oaks should serve as an international leader for the preservation and protection of historic landscapes.

Sincerely,

Janice Cervelli Schach, FASLA
President, American Society of Landscape Architects