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From:
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OFFICE OF ZONING
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

To:
Dr. Edward Keenan, Director
Dumbarton Oaks
1703 32nd Street, NW
Washington, D. C. 20007

February 11, 2000

RE: Additions and Alterations to Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections

Dear Dr. Keenan,

Over the past few months, many concerned citizens have written to you and President Rudenstine about their concerns regarding the plans for expansion ofthe library facilities under the North Vista at the Dumbarton Oaks Garden. Iwould like to add my voice to the chorus of caution.

As a Registered Landscape Architect with twenty years of experience, I am intimately familiar with the development of garden landscapes on roof structures. While I was an Associate with the Boston office of The SWA Group,Landscape Architects, I worked on several rooftop parks and garden projects for below-grade structures, including Convention Center Plaza in Indianapolis and the gardens at Erieview Galleria in Cleveland. I also worked with Wallace Floyd Architects in Boston as a landscape architect and urban designer for the Central Artery/Tunnel Project. I am keenly aware of the impact of underground construction on subsurface water flow and the difficulty in predicting long-term influences on soil structure and plant environments. Because of my interest, experience and research in the

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complex issues that surround the making of landscapes over subterranean buildings, I am alert to potential building failure and the consequences of making repairs.

My greatest concerns are the ramifications of replacing decayed waterproofing materials, leaking masonry and skylight sealant, and plants that have been damaged by—or have caused damage to—the subterranean construction. Buildings, by the very nature of their materials, begin to disintegrate from the moment ofcompletion. The landscape, on the other hand, is a living and ever-changing composition of various media that mature over time. With this maturation, soils can change in character, weight and density. Plants and their root systems can shift position, increase in volume and weight, and contribute detritus to the composition of the soil. In the long run, the landscape evolves and the building dissolves. All buildings, and especially underground buildings, inevitably require extensive maintenance and repair. As a result of the need to gain access to the buried structure, parts of the garden will have to be torn up for incremental or widespread corrections and adjustments. The integrity, continuity and availability of the garden landscape will suffer. In your plan for the Dumbarton Oaks library expansion, the risk involved in transforming the North Vista landscape from a garden on terra firma to a garden on top of a structure is too great a threat to this living monument.

My years of practice in site planning and design also encourages me to carefully scrutinize any building plan that has not clearly anticipated the requirements for emergency egress and fire safety access. It has been my experience that the local Fire Marshal will, at some time in the process for project approval, insist that building occupants have immediate access to the outdoors in case of fire, medical emergency, or other danger to human health, safety and welfare. Your proposal presently shows that the nearest exit for researchers working in the lower level of the library's northeast corner is approximately 140 feet and two flights of stairs into the Pre-Columbian Gallery. Occupants must then pass through approximately 60 feet of interior space to the Gallery's emergency exit at the northwest corner. If the Fire Marshal insists that you have a more immediate and, therefore, safer means of emergency entry or escape, I assume that this stair would likely emerge from the library into the landscape, creating yet another intrusion (with the skylights) into Mrs. Bliss's garden. By the time the Fire Department notifies you of the requirement to make this accommodation, you will have gotten very far into the process of design development and

construction approvals, at a great commitment of time and money. Understandably, you will be disinclined to forfeit the investment made to date and the necessary intrusion will proceed to the detriment of the garden.

Emergency egress is only a part of the scenario that will play out in the final approval process. Police and fire authorities who review this campus building plan could, with all reason and authority, insist that emergency vehicles be given clear access into the North Vista in order to approach the most remote areas of the library (the northeast corner and east side). Typically, fire safety vehicles require an areaway that is 16' wide at a minimum. Because of topographical and structural impediments on the property, the only logical solution would establish vehicle access between 32nd Street, NW, (at S Street, NW) and the North Vista through the Bowling Green between the Director's House and the Copse. The arrival to the North Vista would have to pass through the stone-and-chain fence at the lowest of the four terraces. The approach to the library would necessitate passage over the lawn and up onto the third terrace, causing great damage to the French Steps. The clearing of trees at the eastern end of the Bowling Green and the structural change to the stone-and-chain fence would forever alter the enclosure of the North Vista. This design was initiated by Mrs. Bliss and Beatrix Jones Farrand and subsequently carried out by landscape designer Ruth Havey and others under Mrs. Bliss's direction. The historic integrity of the garden will be destroyed as a result of the changes for emergency access.

I beg you to reconsider your proposal to extend your library facilities into the earth of the North Vista. The future impact of this structure on the character and value of the historic landscape will be devastating. Please recognize the garden as a commodity at least as valuable as the texts and artifacts that you will spend millions of dollars to protect. Please protect this most precious of assets in the Dumbarton Oaks collection.

With regards,

Jack Sullivan

cc: President Rudenstine, Harvard University
Historic Preservation Committee, University of Maryland