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Received by Email

Kent Brinkley, FASLA
Landscape Architect
The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
P.O. Box #1776
Williamsburg, Virginia 23187-1776
Phone: (757) 220-7954
Fax: (757) 565-8570
Email: kbrinkley@cwf.org

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November 3, 1999

Mr. J. Carter Brown, Chairman
Commission of Fine Arts
Suite #312
National Building Museum
441 F Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Mr. Brown,

I am writing this letter to express my sorrow and great concern about a proposal by Dumbarton Oaks to build a two-story underground library at the rear of the main house in the North Vista area of its famous, world-class garden.

I will freely admit that I have not seen any plans that show the exact nature of this proposal and its potential impact upon the existing garden designed by noted landscape architect, Beatrix Jones Farrand (1872-1959). However, based on my reading of the article by Adrian Higgins that appeared in the November 2nd issue of *The Washington Post*, I would hazard to say that the intrusive nature of any structure under the North Vista of the garden gives all regional landscape preservationists great cause for alarm.

BZA
Case No. 16555
Exhibit No. 34

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO.16555
EXHIBIT NO.34

What I find most disturbing about this proposal is that due scholarly diligence has not been taken in determining what impact this work will have on the Dumbarton Oaks garden. More specifically, generally accepted, proper documentary procedures to complete a Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) to assess the significance and character-defining features of the garden have not been followed. Surprisingly, this important landscape has never been nominated for National Register protection, yet the site has long been deemed significant. It is important enough to have merited, just this year, a Centennial Medallion Award by the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA).

Two years ago, I was asked by the former Director of Dumbarton Oaks, Angeliki Laiou, to become one of five members of a new Dumbarton Oaks Garden Advisory Committee that was then being formed. I accepted. This committee's initial charge was to discuss the need for and ways to develop a clear policy of conservation that would help Harvard to ensure the survival and preservation of the existing character of the gardens.

The consensus at that time was that before a policy could be drafted Dumbarton Oaks or Harvard should commission a cultural landscape inventory and analysis to thoroughly document all salient design features. This document would serve as the starting point to define preservation criteria when considering any future physical changes to the landscape. As I've stated, this kind of rigorous, systematic, comprehensive scholarly assessment has yet to be done.

To the surprise of all of us who were asked to serve on that committee, we have not had any further contact from Dumbarton Oaks since late 1997. Incredibly, no other meetings have been held, nor has the current expansion proposal been brought to the attention any of the committee's members. In short, the Garden Advisory Committee was a resource available to Dumbarton Oaks that has not been consulted to help guide the development of the institution's current expansion plans.

Director Edward L. Keenan has pledged that a faithful restoration of

the terraces will be undertaken once the work is finished. The consultants who were hired to undertake the design of this proposed facility, architect Richard Williams and landscape architect, James Urban, FASLA, have been quoted as stating that ground "water levels will be monitored so soil moisture can be regulated." Regardless of one's reaction to these comments, the point is that no one knows with certainty what the long-term impacts of this radical intervention will be on the landscape, or even if it CAN be faithfully restored.

From our experience with several underground structures here at Colonial Williamsburg, I can tell you that it would require a considerable earth coverage of six feet or more over a roof slab in order to properly support the growth and maintenance of trees and shrubs above it. Therefore, although Mr. Keenan's promise of a full and faithful restoration of the North Vista may have been made with the best of intentions, it may not be financially practical or even physically possible due to a potential range of factors and/or unknown site conditions (ie. high underground water table levels or springs; etc.).

My colleague, Jim Urban, is probably one of the most talented and capable landscape architects practicing today, one with long experience and study of the growth and culture of trees in difficult, urban environments. He is certainly well qualified to undertake this project from both a design and technical perspective. That said, however, in the final analysis, Messrs. Urban and Williams still can't ensure that this proposed work might not have unforeseen detrimental effects on the garden.

Moreover, despite Mr. Urban's capabilities, he does not have extensive experience in dealing with the specific questions that are unique to historic landscape preservation. Thus, I must challenge his statement that was quoted in the *Post* article, where he said, "I don't think it (the D.O. landscape) should be considered a frozen landscape .it has changed dramatically" since it came to Harvard in 1940.

Preservation landscape architects are well aware that the Dumbarton

Oaks landscape is certainly not "frozen" in Time. The garden has certainly seen its share of minor, evolutionary changes over the years, as all maturing landscapes typically do.

However, I would submit that there is a VAST degree of difference between these normal types of changes vs. the radical ones that are brought about by major construction. Mr. Urban's argument that the process of change should be accepted as natural, serving to justify this proposal, is not, in my view, valid or relevant in the least.

Mr. Urban's additional comment in the *Post* article about the current wealth of documentation that exists for the garden is certainly true. However, even more data would be helpful and, more importantly, a scholarly assessment of its value is needed. By itself, the fact that good documentation already exists for the garden is NOT ample justification for destroying part of this significant cultural landscape (as Mr. Urban seems to be suggesting), whether it be in the name of operational necessity or the march of progress. Moreover, with the National Park Service property within a stone's throw of this proposed site, a more thorough and systematic review and assessment of the project's impact on both sites is warranted.

In light of what I have shared with you in this letter, I would urge you to please re-consider your position in support of this proposal. In my opinion, for an academic institution like Harvard to entertain the notion of undertaking a project of this magnitude without first applying due diligence and scholarly rigor to document and protect this landscape asset is not only unconscionable, but patently and decidedly irresponsible.

Therefore, I implore you to proceed slowly and to take whatever additional review time you need to better understand what effects this work will have on the garden. The situation and the importance of this cultural resource call for greater circumspection to more fully understand the potential impact the proposed project will have on this much-admired and heavily visited, semi-public garden.

With my thanks for your time and for considering my views on this

topic, I am, Sir,

Sincerely yours,

M. Kent Brinkley, FASLA
Dumbarton Oaks Landscape Advisory Committee Member
Landscape Architect
The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Elizabeth K. Meyer, Associate Professor
Department of Landscape Architecture
University of Virginia School of Architecture
Campbell Hall, Room 308
Charlottesville, VA 22903

Home phone (804) 293-9810
Office phone (804) 924-1044
Department office phone (804) 924-3285
School of Architecture Fax (804) 982-2678