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Washington, DC

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF ZONING
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President Neil Rudenstine
Office of the President
Massachusetts Hall
Harvard University
Cambridge, MA 01238

December10,1999

Dear President Rudenstine,

I know that a host of concerned persons, more informed than I respecting the importance of the landscape architecture of Dumbarton Oaks gardens have written to you to express their dismay over the plans to build a subterranean library there. I add my voice simply because I think you should be aware of my personal experience as a research scholar who works in a subterranean building beneath what is essentially a roof garden, as the North Vista of the Dumbarton garden would become.

I refer to the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery constructed in Washington, D.C. in 1987 as a sister institution of the Freer Gallery of Art, both part of the Smithsonian Institution. In addition to its collection of Asian Art, the Sackler houses the research library for both galleries, located three levels underground. A more apt term than "underground," in this almost below sea level reclaimed marsh on which the nation's capital is built, is "underwater." Despite every engineering effort to keep the water at bay in the end, it is the water that wins. In the decade that I have been at the Sackler, we have had frequent flooding in one part of the building or another. Mop pails have been de rigueur. Water has not spared the library. Valuable books have been lost or severely damaged to leaks, which were not caught before the library could be swaddled in plastic. And the books under it often cannot be accessed for days on end. The Dumbarton Museum argues that scholars, objects, and books must be contiguous, therefore the need for the immediately adjacent library. As a practicing research scholar, I could not agree less. After all, few have the Library of Congress next to their office but scholars worldwide manage very well indeed. Further, if I did my research at Dumbarton I would far prefer to walk a few steps to an above water table library with natural light - - the one that could so easily be build in the otherwise underutilized nearby space on the property -than to have to use soggy and water-damaged books or not be able to access them at all under their plastic shroud. I also would not want to have on my conscience the guilt to being party to the damage to a national treasure that is the Dumbarton garden.

Every leak in the Sackler, of course, necessitates tearing up some part of our beautiful Enid Haupt "roof garden" to find the trouble and repair it. Not only is the garden damaged but a part of it is made unsightly and unusable while the work goes on. It is a given in this water soaked Washington

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locale that this will happen on the North Vista if it becomes a roof garden. Further, despite the best intentions old established plantings will be lost forever. A case in point is the splendid landmark tree in the pre-Sackler garden upon which thousands of dollars were lavished to protect it but which failed to survive the trauma of the surrounding excavation.

These observation I hope will help convince you that building beneath the North Vista is not a viable solution for a library expansion. It is impractical, more costly, and cannot fail to damage a historic garden entrusted to your care. It is also unnecessary because there is a very workable above ground alternative.

Sincerely,

Mary Slusser, PhD
Research Scholar
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art