Concerned Citizens for Dumbarton Oaks

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OFFICE OF ZONING
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Statement to ANC 2E regarding Dumbarton Oaks
presented by Florence Everts
3rd November, 1999

Mr. Chairman and Commissioners:

I am a Concerned citizen and a VERY concerned member of the Potomac Chapter of Landscape Architects

1. We have listened with interest to the presentation regarding the proposed underground library facility, a very large structure of 25,000 SF, to be built beneath the north vista of the garden at Dumbarton Oaks. And the arguments are substantial. We are not in opposition to the expansion of their research facilities and recognize their urgent need for more space to house their library and collections. Nor do we attribute lack of concern or appreciation for the garden itself. Their intention and belief that the garden can be restored to its present condition, in effect a roof garden, is admirable - but perhaps optimistic.

2. We believe the proposed facility is in the wrong location.

3. We know that a feasibility study has been made and other options considered for S St Street and the Copse. We ask that there be further studies made on these and other possible alternative sites and further analysis of the reasons for their rejection. Is it possible that the acre, more or less, of wasteland that is presently behind the Fellows' Building could be considered - without encroachment on The Dell ?

4. This is one of the most important designed landscapes in the United States. Interest in the gardens goes far beyond Georgetown or Harvard. It is an example of landscape art of the highest order, and like all landscape art extremely vulnerable. Dumbarton Oaks and the Rockefeller garden in Maine are considered the two outstanding works of Beatrix Farrand - one of the finest landscape architects of her generation. Those concerned with historic preservation and the art of garden design across the nation must be given a chance to comment. This is a superb and irreplaceable work of art. It is part of of our national cultural heritage.

5. The professionally and widespread accepted procedure for addressing the need to accomodate new facilities on important sites is to undertake a HISTORIC LANDSCAPE REPORT . A significantly different document from a feasibility study

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for a building. Based on such a report a Master Plan should be prepared which should be the basis for any changes in the garden. I understand that no such report has been done and that there has been no consulting Landscape Architect employed by DO for some years.

What is being proposed is a MAJOR INTERVENTION in the garden driven by the internal needs of the institution; the need for expansion overiding potential damage to the garden.

5. What GUARANTEES can be given by anyone in this room give that 10, 20 30 years down the road. that there will not be repeated disturbances to the garden for maintenance and repair. Underground buildings are notorious for their high maintenance requirement. Directors come and go - some maybe more concerned with the state of the garden than others . Who will be the guardian of the subtle grading of the terraces or the restoration of the walls and elgant stone carvings when the time come to repair a leaking roof ?

6. The North Vista - described in the architects' presentation as "no particular historic significance" is a matter with which we take issue.

It was the last 'room' of the garden to be designed, and was done so after the garden was handed over to Harvard. But the changes made there were made under the careful eye of Mrs Bliss and Beatrix Farrand. Farrand herself wrote that she had more difficulty in coming to a decision regarding the North Vista than with any other part of the garden. It was Mrs.Bliss herself, who after many options and mock ups were tried, who made the final decision. Interesting recent research has added new insights into the long and thoughtful process that went into creating the serene and harmonious space that the North Vista presents today .

Finally, Mrs Bliss had belief in Harvard that they would be the most trustworthy stewards of her beloved garden. Who is to say how she would weigh potential damage and change to her garden against the interests and needs of scholarly research ? I, for one, believe she would consider it a betrayal of her trust in Harvard.

7. In consideration of the concerns that are being expressed here tonight we earnestly request :

THAT THE ANC INVOKE THEIR RIGHT TO REQUEST THAT THIS CONCEPT APPLICATION BE REVIEWED BY THE DC HISTORIC PRESERVATION BOARD

This will provide an opportunity for experts in the field of historic preservation, landscape design, horticulture, arborists etc to assess this proposal.