

December 3, 2003

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the DC Historic Preservation Review Board.

My name is Charles I. Cassell and I am speaking as a trustee of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City. I have been authorized by our chair, Ann Hughes Hargrove, to make this presentation to you.

We strongly oppose the location of the proposed building on the east slope of the Dumbarton Oaks property. The design before you might be appropriate for a modern state university dormitory. But nothing in it warrants its joining the remarkable collection of historic structures at Dumbarton Oaks. And, incidentally, it is my understanding that after review of alternative design concepts, Dumbarton Oaks has said that they would adequately accommodate its programs. Thus there is no exigency that would justify this massive intrusion to a very special space.

As to the setting, the landscape design was provided by landscape architect, Beatrix Farrand. It has been said that as Frederick Law Olmstead was the father of landscape design, Ms. Farrand was its mother. One of the most important American landscape architects of the twentieth century, Farrand has the distinction of being the only woman among the eleven founding members of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

Among her talents sought for consistently exceptional projects were:
Supervising landscape architect for Princeton University in 1914
Design of the White House East Garden for President Wilson in 1916
Collaboration with the Blisses on design for Dumbarton Oaks, an association that continued for decades, even past the time that the property was gifted to Harvard University.

Her work at Dumbarton Oaks is considered the finest of her career and includes not only the formal gardens of the north and south vistas, but the heavily wooded steep slope known as “the Dell” ... a distinct garden landscape, through which a serpentine path winds between evenly spaced trunks of pine and hemlock. The preserve was considered so exceptional that an earlier study by the Harvard University Office of planning deliberately avoided the Dell as an appropriate area for expansion.

A 1976 report by Harvard’s Planning office considered only the S Street “knoll” at the street’s edge. Even that site was viewed with caution because it would be “disruptive of the natural beauty of the wooded Dell, and would require the taking of numerous trees that were important to the beauty of the wooded dell and to the graceful wooded, canopied aspect of S Street as well. The Harvard report went on to say that a project at this site would be “decimating [to] the woodland on the knoll.

The proposed project would also be visible from the public space in Rock Creek Park, down the hill on the north side of the Dumbarton Oaks property.

At the September meeting of the Commission of Fine Arts during which this design was considered, the Park Service expressed its concerns about the project's mass and the north façade.

This exceptional site, with its remarkably rich heritage, deserves your protection from improper invasion. We urge you to deny approval.

Thank you.

Charles I. Cassell AIA