

At the Hirshhorn, a Battle Over Plans for Its Sculpture Garden

The museum is going ahead with meetings on a design by the artist Hiroshi Sugimoto that preservationists say would undo key features of postwar landscape design by Lester Collins.

By Jane Margolies

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Advocates for the preservation of modernist landscapes in Washington have taken on another fight. After beating back the National Geographic Society’s plan to demolish “Marabar,” the 1984 sculptural installation by Elyn Zimmerman on its campus, they are now battling the Hirshhorn Museum’s proposal to redo its sunken sculpture garden by the architect Gordon Bunshaft and the landscape architect Lester Collins.

The Hirshhorn, which is part of the Smithsonian Institution, has been advancing a design by the artist and architect Hiroshi Sugimoto that would substantially alter its look and feel.

The standoff comes at a critical time for postwar landscapes, which are reaching an age when refurbishment will increasingly be needed.

Theodore Prudon, the president of the preservation organization Docomomo US, said he was concerned that modernist architecture, including landscape architecture, may suffer at the hands of those who may not appreciate its value.

Mr. Collins’s work, for instance, has only recently begun to attract wider appreciation. Innisfree Garden, his 185-acre masterpiece in Millbrook, N.Y., was listed on the National Register of Historic Places last year.

The Hirshhorn garden — which covers 1.5 acres on the National Mall, across Jefferson Drive from the museum’s famous drum-shaped building by Mr. Bunshaft — did not always have such ardent supporters. Its original scheme, a gravel swath that Mr. Bunshaft created in concert with the building, was widely considered bleak and ill-suited to the capital’s sweltering heat. The New York Times called it a “gravel pit” in 1974, the year the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, as it is officially called, opened.

Mr. Collins, who created gardens all over the capital beginning in the 1950s, was brought in to make amends. He kept Mr. Bunshaft’s slender rectangular reflecting pool, whose shape mirrors the horizontal window on the north side of the museum, underscoring the architect’s view of the building and its garden

as a unified composition of like elements. But Mr. Collins made the setting more parklike, adding lawn and shapely trees that held their own amid large-scale sculptures by artists including Henry Moore. His renovation was completed in 1981.

“He was a choreographer of space,” said Kate Kerin, the landscape curator at Innisfree and an expert on Mr. Collins’s work. She described the Hirshhorn garden as a “procession.”

“His garden is a green oasis with things to discover as you move through it,” she said.

When the Hirshhorn announced plans to redesign it last year, it said there was a need for more outdoor space for large-scale contemporary artworks, including performance-based pieces, and that the landscape elements in general were deteriorating. Garden walls, for instance, are cracked, and drainage issues have caused flooding.

But some critics say the garden was allowed to languish, and its diminished condition used to justify an overhaul. (The Hirshhorn disputes this characterization.)

“We see that all the time when stewards want to change a landscape,” said Charles Birnbaum, the founder and president of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, an education and advocacy group, which has placed the Hirshhorn garden on a list of at-risk landscapes. “We call it starve the landscape, blame the landscape.”



The photographer and architect Hiroshi Sugimoto. His design would replace the reflecting pool with a much bigger one with a stage at its center, among other changes. Jesse Dittmar for The New York Times

In selecting Mr. Sugimoto for the project, the museum is turning to an artist with whom it has maintained a relationship over several years. Mr. Sugimoto’s work was the subject of a 2006 exhibition at the museum, and the artist, who founded the Tokyo-based architectural firm New Material Research Laboratory with

Tomoyuki Sakakida, renovated its lobby in 2018.

Although the museum calls Mr. Sugimoto's design a "revitalization" of the sculpture garden, its critics feel it is much more than that.

They are especially concerned with the proposed changes to the core of the garden, the portion with the reflecting pool. Under the current plan, the pool would be replaced with one more than double its size with a stage at its center. A prominent wall, made of concrete in keeping with the museum structure, would be rebuilt with a surface of large stacked stones.

Green space would decrease and paving increase under the new plan.

The cost to execute it is still being determined, and the museum plans to raise most of the funds privately, a museum spokeswoman, Kate Gibbs, said. The work could take three years.

But critics question the very idea of remaking the garden, which they consider one half of an artistic whole, asking why it isn't being accorded the same respect that is being bestowed upon the building, whose envelope is scheduled to be restored beginning later this year.

"Why are we applying a different set of standards to the landscape architecture than to the building architecture?" Mr. Birnbaum asked. "We should have the same goals."

Because the museum is on federal land, the redesign is subject to federal approval processes and open to public comment.

The museum has held a series of meetings on the plan. Since the museum is closed because of the coronavirus pandemic, the most recent meeting, in late May, took place on Zoom. The format did not allow the kind of back-and-forth that is typical of the review process, known as Section 106, participants said.

People have also been weighing in on the design in writing.

In a letter dated March 25, Andrew Lewis, senior historic preservation officer at the D.C. State Historic Preservation Office, objects to changes to "the critically important historic reflecting pool." He also opposes the stacked stone proposed for the garden wall, saying it would "undermine the role of aggregate concrete as a unifying feature of the building and garden."

The plans for the Hirshhorn garden reflect a shift toward more active use of space by museums, sometimes at the price of quieter pursuits.

But Mr. Prudon of Docomomo US, speaking of the Hirshhorn garden and courtyards that Mr. Bunshaft designed for other buildings, said, "They are visual spaces, they are contemplative spaces, they are not activity spaces."

"I think where we are today is that we are scared of contemplative spaces," Mr. Prudon said.

The museum, whose annual visitation averaged nearly 970,000 over the last three years, sees things differently.

“There have been significant changes in art-making since the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden opened in 1974,” the museum said in a statement. “To fulfill our mission, our Sculpture Garden needs to evolve.”