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## *The Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden Redesign: Paving Paradise*

Washington's modern art museum wants to turn much of its welcoming, verdant garden, so perfect for displaying its outdoor sculpture, into an impersonal hardscape to be used mainly for performance art.

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By Michael J. Lewis

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A rendering of the design for the Hirshhorn's Sculpture Garden by Hiroshi Sugimoto, from 7th Street above the National Mall  
PHOTO: HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN



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The Hirshhorn Museum's Sculpture Garden in Washington is nearly perfect; of course, it must be destroyed. This is the paradox of landscape architecture: The more sensitive and subtle the garden, the more invisible it is—even to its custodians. At a certain point they can mistake it for an opportunity to exploit rather than a sacred trust to protect.

So it has happened at the Hirshhorn, which in 2019 unveiled its "Sculpture Garden Revitalization" plan, with Hiroshi Sugimoto, a Japanese artist-architect, awarded the commission. The existing garden, designed by Washington-based landscape architect Lester Collins, would vanish. Opposition arose at once. It seemed unthinkable that the Hirshhorn could be so indifferent to what was, after all, the largest art object in its possession.



Hiroshi Sugimoto

PHOTO: HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

Three months ago, at a livestreamed public hearing, the Hirshhorn presented its plans to the National Capital Planning Commission, which vets changes to the National Mall. The commission granted its approval, subject to the Hirshhorn addressing specific concerns it had raised. These revised plans were then presented for public comment at a March 10 livestreamed public hearing organized by the Hirshhorn.

In particular, the Hirshhorn had been asked to provide “a comprehensive rationale” for two especially consequential changes, rebuilding the garden’s main partition wall in different form and with different materials, and expanding its pool to make room for a performance space platform. At the same time, less radical alternatives were to be proposed. In its latest presentation the Hirshhorn was straightforward about its rationale: It is committed to the art that is being created today and is therefore “increasingly invested in performance art.” Given this single-minded goal, its proposed modifications—a slightly smaller expansion of the pool and new planting beds to the east, west and north walls—could not help but be token gestures.

To understand what would be lost in the Sugimoto redesign, one must first understand what was gained when the Collins garden took root. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, with its important collection of late-19th- and 20th-century modern European and American art, opened to the public in 1974. Both the museum and its 1.5 acre garden were designed by Gordon Bunshaft, one of the leading modern architects of his day. The Bunshaft garden was widely panned. It was a mostly treeless plaza that extended the Brutalist theme of the museum onto the Mall, its only grace note a small sunken pool. For most of the Washington summer it was unbearable.

Three years later, Mr. Collins was engaged to salvage the garden. In fact, he transformed it. He filled it with broad swaths of lawn and judiciously chosen trees—copper beeches, cherry, ginkgos, etc.—and in place of a plaza that could be taken in at a glance, he created a garden that revealed its treasures gradually. One arrives from the Mall, gets a first teasing glimpse of the pool below, and then descends to two lower levels by way of a long graceful ramp (well before it was mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act). Once below, the visitor strolls along gently meandering paths, a new sculpture swinging into view with each turn.

The color palette of gray concrete and green plantings is especially happy, modulating between the greenery of the Mall and the Brutalist concrete of the museum, the landscape equivalent of a key change. It also forms an ideal setting for looking at sculpture outdoors, a neutral background against which the sculpture practically pops forward.

But no more, if Mr. Sugimoto’s plans are carried out. They are the one thing that is worse than a blunder—they are the repeat of a blunder. He proposes to replace the garden’s

central lawn with that performance space, a paved plaza and a much enlarged sunken pool with a central stage, about 18 feet by 18 feet. The north entrance to the Mall is to be widened to 60 feet and the underground entrance to the museum to the south, closed for decades, will be reopened. The widening of the entrance and the lowering of the north partition wall make the garden seem part of a continuous monumental axis, rather than a space unto itself. And what is now a secluded and intimate enclosure will become again what it was half a century ago, a chilly formal plaza that is subordinated to the aloof Brutalist enclosure beyond.



A rendering of the East Gallery of the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden with Henry Moore sculpture

PHOTO: HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

Only once does Mr. Sugimoto depart from formality. He would replace the sheer concrete wall to the north of the performance space with a stacked stone wall. Against the austerity of his plaza, it strikes an oddly rustic note, and its agitated surfaces will clash with the lines of any sculpture displayed before it. But its sloping sides would also act to break up any echoes wafting up from the performance space, which for the Hirshhorn takes precedence over all other considerations.

The redesigned garden, the Hirshhorn promises, will permit “a vibrant calendar of performance art,” with two or three works during the “spring and fall seasons.” But what about summer, which for most families is vacation time? At present, the garden offers them a cool shaded oasis on the sweltering griddle of the Mall, to be enjoyed at any time. This is to be sacrificed for program space that will be used for a few hours a week, and only during certain months of the year—and for a niche audience at that, performance art being one of the more rarefied pleasures of contemporary art. And so an expansive and flexible outdoor space is now to be turned into a single-use amenity, a roofless room of the museum.

If this year of Covid has taught us anything, it is that public green space fills a deep human need for a place where we can congregate without crowding and feel that sense of social belonging that comes with the sight of others engaged in the same activity as us. To be fair, the garden has not been well maintained, perhaps by design. But you reach for the weed-whacker before the wrecking ball.

Perhaps the wrecking ball will not swing. The proposal must still be vetted later this year by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission. Memo to all parties: If it ain’t broke, don’t break it.

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