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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Designation Case Nos. 17-09 and 21-13

### National Geographic Society Headquarters

1145 17<sup>th</sup> Street, 1146 and 1156 16<sup>th</sup> Street, and 1600 M Street NW  
Square 183, Lots 883 and 884

Meeting Date: March 24, 2022  
Applicants: D.C. Preservation League; National Geographic Society  
Affected ANC: 2B

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends the Board designate the National Geographic Society Headquarters complex a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of national significance, consisting of three contributing buildings and one noncontributing, and with a period of significance of 1904 to 1964, from the commencement of construction of the organization's first purpose-built headquarters to the dedication of the Edward Durrell Stone-designed office and museum building.

This is an unusual, but not unprecedented, instance of two concurrent nominations covering a property. In 2017, the D.C. Preservation League submitted a nomination for the Edward Durrell Stone-designed building on 17<sup>th</sup> Street because of its architectural distinctiveness and the fact that it was not protected within the Sixteenth Street Historic District boundary. A few years later, the National Geographic Society itself submitted a nomination encompassing its entire complex, whose earliest building was completed in 1904. As all the buildings share the historical significance of an internationally known scientific organization of long standing, and they possess their own architectural importance, it seems appropriate to take the best of both nominations and to forward the result to the National Register.

### Background

Forerunners of the National Geographic Society can be found in natural philosophy societies of the Enlightenment, that evolved specialties in geography, geology, archaeology, botany, zoology and other earth sciences as the age of exploration was perpetuated by European colonization and empire-building. These topics were joined by ethnology, linguistics, and the rudiments of anthropology, studying but frequently condescending to non-European peoples. Many scientific societies were effectively self-contained clubs of experts. America's National Geographic Society, founded in 1888, was constituted by experts in several pure and applied scientific disciplines as well as enthusiastic others who were instrumental in administration, fundraising and promotion. This boded well for a young republic; although it not without its own prejudices, founded by principally Euro-American "gentlemen," the National Geographic Society was more democratic through its outreach via its magazine.

Established as a somewhat irregularly published technical newsletter, *National Geographic Magazine* soon expanded its content, adopted a more popular tone, and incorporated the prolific

photo illustrations that would become its trademark. Thus did it appeal to an ever-growing domestic and international audience, diffusing scientific knowledge to an army of subscribers and other readers. The yellow-bordered front cover became an informal trademark after its adoption in 1910 and was officially trademarked as the Society's rectangle logo 60 years later.<sup>1</sup>

Forever to be identified with its flagship magazine, the Society embarked on the new medium of film just after the turn of the twentieth century, producing footage of the 1902 Ziegler Polar Expedition. These efforts would culminate in IMAX theater features decades later. Television productions began in 1958 and continuing through a long-running series, a cable channel and public-television specials. Which is not to say that the Society has been merely an entertainment outlet.

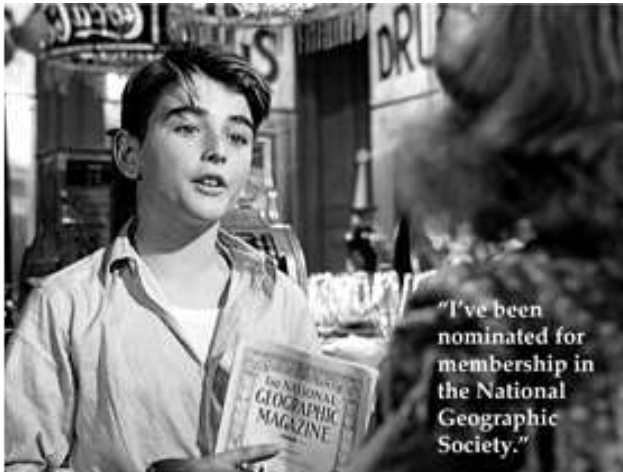
As early as 1890, National Geographic began sponsoring research and exploration, since that time awarding more than 14,000 grants. It has also published numerous world maps, some of which were employed by the U.S. military during World War II. Its headquarters has been home to a prominent museum for decades. The Society periodically awards its Hubbard Medal for distinction in exploration, discovery and research. Its earliest recipient was polar explorer Robert Peary. Jane Goodall was so honored thirty years after the 1965 airing of National Geographic's film *Miss Jane Goodall and the Wild Chimpanzees*, narrated by Orson Welles. The "National" in its name referred to the society's home in the United States, but it was by nature international in its focus from the outset. And it would follow divers and submersibles into the seas, and satellites, probes and astronauts into space.

In its early years, the Society shifted offices a few times, but found that it needed a commodious permanent headquarters, largely to handle the demand for its magazine. The 1904 construction was funded largely by Boston attorney Gardiner Greene Hubbard, first president of the Society, and father-in-law of Alexander Graham Bell, another founding member. Deaf and a former student of her husband, Mabel Gardiner Hubbard Bell was familiar with the Volta Bureau laboratory in Georgetown and directed the architects to make the building's interior more practical and less decorative. Hornblower & Marshall's Renaissance palazzo was a freestanding gem, only slightly harmed since by its attachment to later additions.

Begun in 1912, the first of these additions was meant to accommodate the rapid growth of the magazine operation under the Society's first full-time staff, Gilbert Hovey Grosvenor. Circulation had grown to more than 150,000. This building was contemporaneous with the first National Geographic-owned printing plant in Eckington and preceded by a few years the use of the former Schlitz Brewing Company depot as a distribution center. Known as the Administration Building, its core and a 1931 wing were designed by Washington architect Arthur Heaton and erected by the George A. Fuller Company. A Classical Revival tripartite main block with a central, porticoed pavilion, it dominates the block and echoes the classicism of Washington's federal core, visually placing this institution on a par with the city's most important federal, civic, financial and cultural organizations. This building was again expanded in 1948-1949, because the war had broadened Americans' consciousness of and interest in the world at large. Circulation now topped 2,000,000.

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<sup>1</sup> The rectangle signifies a portrait frame, just as the magazine cover border had become, in a yellow color to suggest the sun that shines over the entire world.



*A still from the film It's a Wonderful Life. By 1946, all Americans knew where coconuts come from.*

But the Society staff, the magazine, the photographs and films were still proliferating. More office space and exhibit space were soon required. The Society acquired the properties behind the headquarters, clearing them for a new building to face 17<sup>th</sup> Street. It was 1959, and the Society again sought to keep up with the times architecturally. It engaged Edward Durell Stone, who the National Geographic's nomination calls accurately, if a bit anachronistically, a starchitect.

Leading light of the New Formalism movement, Stone looked to classical architecture for inspiration in returning to major buildings some hierarchy, monumentality and historical reference—in place of functionalist Modern, gridded boxes that lacked identity or a relationship to their context and had often grown stale, derivative, and even cheap. A fellow of the American Institute of Architects, he had designed the U.S. Embassy at New Delhi, the U.S. Pavilion at Expo '58 in Brussels and the International Trade Mart in New Orleans, among many others. He was already at work on what would become the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Stone's National Geographic headquarters employed his trademark projecting roof, in this case pierced, perhaps in a reference to classical coffered ceilings, but introducing a play of light and shadow. Freestanding, connected with the other buildings underground, the marble-clad building sits on a ground-floor plinth with its own overhang. The body of the building is distinguished by a series of vertical ribs spaced an arm span apart, giving a human scale to a ten-story building, tempering the monumental gestures and de-emphasizing the reading of the several floors behind. The magazine *Interior Design* called the project a “new Washington landmark”; critic Ada Louise Huxtable extolled Stone's relating of a modern office building to the city's “tradition of classic marble monumentality”; and Stone admitted it was his favorite of his office commissions.

Only two decades later, yet another building was called for, and the Society tapped perhaps the most prominent American designers of office space, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, with David Childs as lead architect. Erected between the early and the mid-twentieth-century buildings on space that had been largely devoted to surface parking, it provided a subterranean garage as well as a landscaped courtyard. The courtyard is the rationale for the J-shaped footprint, which backs up the older buildings. To admit and take advantage of more natural light, the seven floors set back in a ziggurat fashion. The building accommodated additional offices, libraries, and the institution's first large auditorium. The most notable feature of the courtyard is Elyn

Zimmerman's large-scale stone project "Marabar," consisting of five granite boulders arrayed around a shallow rectangular pool, some polished to a mirror-like finish. The pool is on axis with the Stone building, and the boulders, evoking the natural world, both screen and reveal the entrance to the SOM building.

### **Significance**

The significance of this complex is obvious. National Geographic is a household name and of longstanding international influence. It numbers among the institutions most responsible for research and exploration in the natural sciences and for the diffusion of scientific knowledge worldwide, especially to a general audience. While of international scope, Washington has been the seat of its administrative, publishing, production, planning and grant-making, and this complex is a visual and cultural landmark of the city. For these reasons, this property is significant for its association with an institution and achievements that contributed significantly to the heritage and culture of the District of Columbia and, at least as much so, to the nation and the world. It merits local designation and listing in the National Register under D.C. designation Criterion B and National Register Criterion A.

The property also merits designation under the criteria for architecture—D.C. Criteria D, E and F and National Register Criterion C—as comprising excellent examples of institutional buildings, incorporating office, laboratory, auditorium, archive and exhibit spaces, that possess high artistic values and the work of masters in their field. The 1963 building is particularly distinctive, arguably of national significance as one of the best examples of Edward Durell Stone's international New Formalist work.

The property is also important for its association with significant individuals, i.e., under National Register Criterion B and D.C. Criterion C. Broadly, this can be said to include any number of prominent scientists, photographers and writers who have contributed to Society-sponsored research, exploration and publication. More specific to this site, however, would be Alexander Graham Bell, already renowned when he became a founding member, second president, and one of the Society's most important financial backers. Other founding members included ichthyologist George Brown Goode; ornithologist Henry Henshaw; "father of American mapmaking," Henry Gannet; Cleveland Abbé, father of the Weather Bureau; and explorers John Wesley Powell, George Kennan, and Adolphus Greely. The most important to the institution and its magazine were their prime movers: Bell; first president and financier Gardiner Greene Hubbard; and editor Gilbert Grosvenor.

The institution continued to be shaped by the leadership of the remarkable succession of Grosvenor heirs as editors, presidents and chairmen. For the purpose of Criterion B, however, the National Register may find too circular the logic of the institution being significant for association with the administrators of the institution, no matter how central they have been. In addition, Gilbert Melville Grosvenor, discussed in the Society's nomination, did not join the staff until after the proposed period of significance.

### **Period of significance and contributing features**

The proposed period of significance commences with the construction of Hubbard Hall, the Society's first headquarters. Neither nomination proposes a terminal date beyond the completion of the Stone building. This is reasonable, as such a span incorporates that important building and the physical and organizational growth of the Society through nearly half of its history, up to the

period when it was entering television production and reporting the early exploration of outer space. It is also near the closing date for the Sixteenth Street Historic District, whose western boundary it straddles.

The SOM-designed building is a pretty substantial noncontributing feature. The Board has previously discussed alterations to the 1963 and 1984 buildings and the courtyard between, affecting, too, the Marabar landscape sculpture. The Board acknowledged that the 1984 building campaign postdates the Sixteenth Street period of significance, and it is not inappropriate to do the same with the landmark. The Board's regulations require it to designate only those properties for which "sufficient time shall have passed since they achieved significance or were constructed to permit professional evaluation of them in their historical context." Some professional critical appraisal of Marabar was offered on that previous occasion, and less of the SOM project overall. While a work of art or architecture may be admired immediately upon completion, we must consider them in their historic context. The Board does not set an age limit for designations but has designated only one property—Third Church of Christ, Scientist (demolished)—of comparable age to the SOM project. As always, we are mindful of the applicable National Register guidance, because it is widely accepted and will apply to any nomination that is forwarded to the Register for listing (Third Church was not). We try to keep local and national listings parallel. On the matter of age, the National Register bulletins are clear:

Fifty years ago is used as the closing date for periods of significance where activities begun historically continued to have importance and no more specific date can be defined to end the historic period. (Events and activities occurring within the last 50 years must be exceptionally important to be recognized as "historic" and to justify extending a period of significance beyond the limit of 50 years ago.)

The evidence thus far does not present a case of exceptional significance for the 1984 project, despite their being quality works of talented practitioners of the arts, but it should be reappraised as the 50-year limit approaches.

### **Integrity**

Each of the property's buildings retains high historic integrity, with their setting principally affected by the addition of each succeeding one to the complex. The principal exterior alterations are the connections between them, replacement windows, some alterations to openings, and masonry repairs. The landscape has been altered with the addition of the midblock courtyard and with the benches and planting areas added to the 17<sup>th</sup> Street frontage, but the greensward and the impressive, stepped approaches to the 16<sup>th</sup> Street buildings remain.