
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Property Address:	1600 M Street, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	16th Street Historic District		Consent Calendar
		X	Concept Review
Meeting Date:	February 25/March 4, 2021	X	Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	19-460		New Construction
			Demolition

The National Geographic Society, with plans prepared by Hickok Cole Architects, returns to the Board regarding a conceptual design for construction of an entrance pavilion and plaza at their campus between 16th and 17th Streets along M Street NW. The intent of the project is to unify the existing campus buildings with a central pedestrian plaza and public entrance that can accommodate outdoor presentations, lectures, exhibits and events. With minor suggestions for refinements (since made in consultation with HPO), the Board approved the concept and delegated final construction plan approval at the August 1, 2019 meeting.

However, at the May 28, 2020, in response to numerous letters it received regarding the proposed removal of the Marabar sculpture within the M Street courtyard, the Board determined that it did not have sufficient information on the sculpture when it approved the redevelopment plans that would result in its removal. The Board asked that the project be scheduled for reconsideration at a future meeting so it could hear from the project applicants and proponents of the sculpture's retention. While the Board did not make a motion or take a vote, it stated that it strongly encouraged National Geographic to consider whether the sculpture could remain in place or be incorporated into its proposed project.

Property History and Description

The National Geographic campus is comprised of four distinct but interconnected buildings: Hubbard Hall (1902); the building to the south of Hubbard Hall, constructed in two phases in 1912 and 1932; the 17th Street annex, designed by Edward Durrell Stone and constructed in 1963; and the 1984 M Street building, designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), which wraps behind the 16th Street buildings and opens to the courtyard facing M Street.

The 1902, 1912-1932 and 1984 buildings are located within the 16th Street Historic District, which has a period of significance that extends from 1815 (the construction of St. John's Church on Lafayette Square) to 1959 (the date of construction of the International Hod Carriers building, the last of the street's purpose-built national trade associations). National Geographic's 1902 and 1912-1932 buildings are contributing to the 16th Street Historic District; the 1984 building is non-contributing.

The 1963 building is located outside the 16th Street Historic District. A landmark application was submitted for it by the DC Preservation League in 2017, which remains on file but has not been scheduled for Board consideration. At the encouragement of HPO, the National

Geographic Society agreed to prepare a landmark nomination for the entire campus that would provide a more complete institutional history of the property. While that nomination has not yet been submitted, it is HPO's understanding that it will not include the SOM building as contributing to the property, both because it is not considered of particular institutional or architectural importance and due to the heightened challenge required by the National Register of Historic Places for the evaluation of properties less than 50 years old.

Marabar is large-scale sculpture commissioned by National Geographic for the plaza that was created contemporaneously with the M Street building. The piece was designed by artist Elyn Zimmerman and completed in 1984. It consists of a 6' x 60' rectangular reflecting pool surrounded by five granite boulders. The title of the piece references the fictional Marabar Caves in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*.

Current Submission

The applicants have spent the past nine months evaluating options to respond to the Board's direction. The current submission includes studies undertaken by the architects for retaining the piece in its current location as well as relocating it elsewhere on the site - both outside and inside the new entrance pavilion – and summarizes the spatial and operational conflicts presented by each of the various options.

After concluding that retention of the piece on site was not feasible, the applicants undertook a search for an alternative location, ideally within the District and where it would remain accessible to the public. An agreement has recently been reached to relocate it to Canal Park, opened in 2012 at 200 M Street SE; the 3-acre park was conceived to both celebrate the history of the Washington Canal which ran through the area in the 19th century and as a demonstration of sustainable practices for stormwater management. Precise siting of the piece has not yet been finalized but the intent is to relocate it to the northern portion of the park, now occupied by a large open lawn.

The applicants are seeking confirmation of the Board's 2019 conceptual approval for the project that includes relocating Marabar off site so that site preparation for construction of the pavilion and plaza can commence.

Evaluation

With respect to historic districts, the purposes of the Historic Protection Act are:

- (a) To retain and enhance those properties *which contribute to the character of the historic district* [emphasis added] and to encourage their adaptation for current use;
- (b) To assure that alterations of existing structures are compatible with the character of the historic district; and
- (c) To assure that new construction and subdivision of lots in an historic district are compatible with the character of the historic district.

The designation of the National Geographic property within the 16th Street Historic District is clear that the 1984 building, including the current plaza and Marabar sculpture, fall well outside

the period of significance for the district. While critical assessment of Marabar, both upon its completion and since, suggest that it is an important work of art, it is not protected as a contributing historic resource under the city's preservation review process.

The studies developed at the Board's request for the sculpture's on-site retention, either in its existing or a new on-site location, illustrate the potential conflicts with the applicant's goal of having a flexible open space that can be programmed in a variety of ways. While program goals for an architectural project are not immutable and can certainly be modified, requiring modifications to an applicant's program should be made for achieving compliance with the purposes of the preservation act.

Fortunately, the Board's statement to the applicants in May has resulted in a resolution that will preserve the piece within a publicly accessible open space within the District of Columbia. While the new location will obviously be different from the current setting and remove it from the institution that commissioned it, the physical object will remain for public enjoyment and interpretation that can explain the significance and history of the piece.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board reaffirm its previous conceptual approval of the entrance plaza and pavilion project, which includes relocation of the Marabar sculpture off site, as compatible with the character of the 16th Street Historic District, and delegate final approval to staff.

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