

**Testimony on the Historic Significance of the Smithsonian  
Quadrangle Historic District before the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board,  
Washington, D.C., April 27, 2017  
On Behalf of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City**

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[NOTE: The Nomination in support of which this testimony was given, was prepared by D. Peter Sefton and Richard W. Longstreth

[NOTE ALSO: The Washington, DC Historic Preservation Review Board unanimously designated the Smithsonian Quadrangle a Local Landmark on April 27, 2017, finding it met National Register Criteria for Significance

[Excerpted from Testimony]

[The Quadrangle Historic District] is an extraordinary ensemble of buildings and landscape, created over a period of nearly a century and a half, from 1846 to 1987. The nomination delineates the many facets of this complex that render it historically significant. Our research draws from a very substantial array of period documents – popular and professional journals, newspapers, and the extensive archives of the Smithsonian – from scholarly studies, and from a firsthand knowledge of architecture, landscape architecture, urbanism, and historic preservation projects across the United States and from many places abroad.

The Smithsonian Institution Building (The Castle) of 1846-51 stands among the finest examples we have of a public building rendered in one of the Romantic modes of the antebellum period, a pioneering example of a museum in the United States, and a very important work of James Renwick, one of the most significant and understudied architects of that era. The Arts & Industries Building (1879-81) similarly is a highly innovative landmark in the then still fledgling realm of museum design and arguably the most significant work of its architect Adolph Cluss, who had an enormous impact on the shaping of Washington after the Civil War. Both are deservedly national historic landmarks. The third building, the Freer Gallery (1923-28), is more conservative than path breaking in its design, but nonetheless is perhaps the premier example of a non-residential design by Charles Adams Platt, one of leading American architects of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Freer is also an important embodiment of a new level of seriousness with which Americans were then beginning to take Asian art. It, justifiably, is listed on the National Register.

Finally, there is the Quadrangle Building, or Quadrangle (1980-87), a major purpose of which was to take the other three, disparate buildings and tie them together, unifying them into a consummate urbanistic ensemble, one of the most sophisticated of its kind in the United States. The Quadrangle itself consists of four parts: the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, the National Museum of African Art, the S. Dillon Ripley Center, and the Enid A. Haupt Garden, occupying all the open space between the three earlier buildings.

Since the Quadrangle is the only component not already listed [on the National Register], I want to devote my time to discussing key facets of its historical significance, which more than meet the threshold of “exceptional importance” for properties less than fifty years old. At the same time, I want to emphasize that it is an integral part of the larger whole. Much of its significance stems from that whole and the significance of the whole, in turn, is very much dependent upon this component. So when I speak about the Quadrangle it is bearing the entire complex in mind.

First, this [The Quadrangle] is an unusually innovative and sophisticated example of compatibility relating new design to iconic buildings of great historical significance. Here the entrance pavilions employ geometric forms obliquely referring to the buildings opposite them – the African Museum from the Freer and the Sackler from the A&I – but the relationship is more than one of motif. The pavilions at once engage Independence Avenue, adding to the sequence of monumental fronts that run for several blocks – from the Freer to the Air and Space Museum, and, now, to the National Museum of the American Indian. But the pavilions also provide a buffer from the street, shielding and enhancing the Quadrangle’s inner spaces. In addition, they contribute to the sense of procession into and through this landscape. The Renwick Gates, constructed as part of this complex according to a design prepared by James Renwick himself, are placed on axis with the Castle. Set on a cross-axis, the museum entrance pavilions enhance the sense of formality. Movement to the Castle is deflected somewhat by the parterre, which is rendered in the Gardenesque manner of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, the parterre strengthens the visual ties between the Renwick Gates and the Castle entrance and it emphatically underscores the Castle’s dominant role in the ensemble. Finally, the parterre ties the other components of the Haupt Garden together, contributing to a sense of seamlessness throughout the premises. The multi-faceted design of the garden is also astutely related to the varying nature of each of the buildings it fronts. Through architecture, landscape design, and planning the Quadrangle enhances all of its constituent parts.

Design compatibility was not a new idea in the 1980s. McKim, Mead & White worked in this vein beginning nearly a century earlier, but the concept ran afoul among avant-garde modernists during the interwar decades and is often still seen an antithetical to creative design. Preservationists, of course, have embraced compatibility, but many architects and critics continue to view the results as compromises with little intrinsic merit. The fallaciousness of such accusations is driven home by numerous examples since World War II – a subject I got to explore a few years ago with colleagues at an annual meeting of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, which resulted in a book that I edited, Frank Lloyd Wright: Preservation, Design, and Adding to Iconic Buildings. But among the many examples nationwide, most are noteworthy as additions or adjacencies to individual buildings, as is the case with Toshiko Mori’s brilliant design of 2008-09 for the visitor center at Wright’s Darwin Martin house in Buffalo. They are not necessarily contributors to a large urban whole. A few do have a major urban impact: I. M. Pei’s Society Hill Towers in Philadelphia (1959-64), for instance, or locally, John Carl Warnecke’s plan for new buildings facing Lafayette Square of 1962-69

At that time the latter was a very innovative resolution for redeveloping a major urban setting. The Quadrangle is in the same league – a national example of how preservation concerns can generate remarkable, innovative design solutions. The Quadrangle’s architect, Jean Paul Carlhian, was acutely sensitive to preservation concerns, writing about them for the National Trust and serving on several landmarks commissions. Along with the Quadrangle, he designed the Billings Student Center at the University of Vermont (1984), where a large addition was made behind two, ridge-riding buildings by Henry Hobson Richardson and McKim, Mead & White – an addition that allows the older buildings to stand free from the green while, at the rear, tying them to a complex that is both robust and unobtrusive.

Second, the Quadrangle ranks among the largest and most accomplished of a series of projects in the U. S. that sought to preserve significant open space and building exteriors by placing new facilities underground. Cornell University played a pioneering role in this sphere with its campus store of 1970 and, later in that decade, with fully underground additions the Uris and Olin libraries, which you see here. At Harvard, Hugh Stubbins’ 1976 Pusey Library was designed as a mostly below-grade facility, with its top floor rising partly aboveground and capped by a landscaped terrace. Alexander Kouzmanoff’s underground addition to Avery Hall at Columbia, built the following year, had almost no ground-level presence save the terrace that forms its roof. Begun shortly after the Quadrangle and completed in 1993 is the very large underground extension of the Texas Capitol in Austin. Here space for new building was never at a premium, but preserving the Capitol grounds and vistas were of paramount importance, as was the need to accommodate a large number of government meetings and visitor groups.

The Quadrangle differs from such examples in important ways. It is not really an addition so much as it is a new building – a very sizable new building that houses three discreet facilities. The Quadrangle is also more than a covering – terraces, lawns, skylights that top a subterranean complex. As architecture and landscape it is active, intricate, complex, and the Haupt Garden is a destination in its own right. Furthermore, the Quadrangle is an integral component of a highly diverse setting. In all these respects it bears comparison to I. M. Pei’s slightly later underground addition to the Louvre. There, the function is, of course, quite different: to provide a new, grand entrance to the museum, and it is a full embodiment of Pei’s approach to complement the established setting through arresting contrast rendered through an abstract, geometric minimalism. Considered together, the two projects offer insightful illustration of the great scope of design approaches and forms of expression that existed in Modern architecture during the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Third, the Quadrangle’s design, as a work of architecture and as a landscape, is of an exceptionally high caliber in terms of its intrinsic qualities. The balance, for example, that the museum entrance pavilions achieve between monumental portals in their own right and in also being deferential components of a larger whole is one that is relatively rare in architecture. Inside, the stair towers inside are tours de force in conquering normative perceptions of descent. By his own account Carlhian worked hard to obviate the negative associations that people have when they go underground. But he went

significantly further in developing these spaces so that the experience evokes the dignified, even magisterial effect of ascending the main stairs in a grand Beaux-Arts building. There is much formality in the planning of the Quadrangle that suggests Carlhian's privileged Parisian background and his training at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Axis, symmetry, and hierarchy – all conspicuous classical ordering devices – permeate the scheme. But they are offset by more incidental paths of movement and by an ingenious use of plant material that draws from Eastern as well as Western traditions and envelops much of the complex with soft, delicate textures during much of the year

In their imagery, too, the entrance pavilions are an interplay of opposites. Each refers to the non-Western nature of the artistic contents below, but like some of the work of Sir Edwin Lutyens in India, the pair couches such allusions firmly in the classical tradition. And it is the rather non-classical criss-crossing of the main stairs in these pavilions that give the process of going down such a ceremonial feeling. Only through traversing all the walks in the Quadrangle does one become aware of how different they are in character – from the esplanades framing the parterre to the intimate cross-axial paths to the north of the entrance pavilions, to the meandering walk along the Castle's south elevation, to the routes that lies adjacent to the A&I and the Freer. The configuration of open space and the manipulation of trees, shrubs, and flowerbeds contribute to this rich spectrum. The result could easily have wound up as a collage – as assemblage of disparate parts – yet quite the opposite effect pervades. Like the Mall and its extension into Potomac Park, the Quadrangle embraces a diversity of parts that appear as a seamless whole. As a landscape design, the Quadrangle is quite extraordinary in the ways so many facets are woven into a rich, unified tapestry. Few small urban parks in the U.S. can rival the aplomb with which this characteristic is achieved here and few, too, can match its popularity with the public.

Fourth, the Quadrangle is a distinguished example of the work created by its architect, Jean Paul Carlhian, and principal landscape architect, Lester Collins. Neither figure is widely known today; however, both were highly respected nationally during the decade when the Smithsonian project was developed.

Having attended both the Ecole des Beaux Arts and Harvard's Graduate School of Design, arguably the pacesetter for avant-garde architectural instruction after World War II, Carlhian brought a multiplicity of ideas to the table when he started teaching at Harvard. He subsequently joined the Boston firm of Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson & Abbott, founded by Henry Hobson Richardson in the 1870s and the oldest, continuously operating architectural office in the U.S. Carlhian became a partner in the firm in 1963 and vice-president and director nine years later. He was especially well known for his institutional work, including several major complexes at Harvard – here Leverett House (1958-62) – as well as buildings at Williams, Middlebury, Vassar, Brown, Cornell, Northeastern, and the universities of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. He was nationally respected by his peers as a champion of exceptional design. He received a number of professional awards, and Shepley, Bulfinch won the American Institute of Architects' firm award under his tenure. As part of this distinguished portfolio, he considered the Quadrangle to be among his finest works.

Lester Collins came into the project at a relatively late stage, yet, working closely with Carlhian, had a consequential impact on the scheme. He, too, attended Harvard, receiving an undergraduate degree in architecture in 1939. While there he began to have his career shaped by Walter and Marian Beck, a couple with whom he would work for decades in transforming their Millbrook, New York, estate into an extensive garden inspired by an 8<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese poet, painter, and gardener. A trip to Asia in the late 1930s, followed by a second, extended tour in 1954, helped Collins to become among the most informed Americans on Asian, and especially Chinese, gardens at that time. Thereafter he settled in Washington, opening an office that was responsible for a broad range of landscape designs in the metropolitan area and elsewhere. Collins also renewed his relationship with the Becks, and following their deaths in the 1950s took charge of transforming their estate, Innisfree, into a public landscape, doubling the garden's size and introducing many new features. He considered it his life's work, and it stands, along with the Quadrangle, as the two principal contributions of a designer described by a colleague "the most important and unsung landscape architect of the late twentieth century." Both examples are testaments to Collins' capacity to synthesize Eastern and Western landscape traditions and integrate so many seemingly divergent parts.

Fifth, the Quadrangle manifests a significant broadening of the Smithsonian's program to embrace non-Western cultures through collections and exhibitions at a key location on the Mall. The project emanated from Secretary Ripley's belief not just in presenting non-Western cultures by focusing on their impact of that of this country, but rather embracing a truly cosmopolitan perspective that would render the museum a social and intellectual crossroads. This objective began to be achieved with the 1978 authorization to acquire the Museum of African Art, which had outgrown its makeshift quarters on Capitol Hill. The following year Ripley began to court Arthur Sackler, who had one of the great private collections of Asian and Islamic art. Sackler not only donated a major part of his collection to the museum that would bear his name, he gave several million dollars towards its construction. These major acquisitions became a defining moment in the Smithsonian's history, when it emerged as an ever more important repository and presentation ground for a diversity of cultures worldwide.

Finally, the Quadrangle is arguably the most important physical embodiment of Dillon Ripley's unequalled contributions to the Smithsonian. This attribute is no mean feat given that no secretary, before or since, has begun to rival Ripley's building expansion program. The Air and Space Museum, the Hirshhorn, the American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery, the Renwick Gallery, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, a number of buildings at the National Zoo, and the Cooper-Hewitt in New York all vastly enlarged both the scope and depth of activities the institution was able to undertake. Both published and archival records of the period make clear that the Quadrangle was Ripley's most cherished project, his personal vision, the embodiment of his efforts to broaden the nature of cultural engagement and also public engagement through programs. He targeted this plan for the embarrassingly unfinished "back lot", which fronted the principal face of Renwick's building, so that the space could, for the first time, be meaningfully developed and done so in an ecumenical way.

It is the Quadrangle that Ripley chose as a backdrop for an informal, yet official, portrait, with him seated on the parapet of the Forrestal Building, with the Smithsonian's first building spreading out behind and the Quadrangle, his last building, in the foreground. Closure after one hundred, forty years.

The Quadrangle, including the buildings that form that space, is an anomaly, which is very important in considering its historical significance. It stands in a rarified world in its quality as a design that enhances and unifies a collection of varied, even disparate designs of great historical importance. It is distinct as a solution to adding facilities while preserving open space and historic buildings. It is a highly distinctive and unusual design among institutions broadly and museums especially. It is no less distinctive as a small urban park space. It stands singularly in the work of the two distinguished designers. It is a benchmark in the broadening of the Smithsonian's mission. It is an apt monument to the no less singular man who ran that institution, who made the ensemble necessary, and who saw it as his crowning achievement.

Has enough time elapsed since the building was completed thirty years ago to assess it from a historical perspective? Absolutely. It was the product of individuals who stand a generation or two away from us today. Their approach differs from what many people might do at present. Their outlook differed. Their design sensibilities differed. We can assess their achievements with a justifiable sense of detachment, just as historians may reasonably assess – and do assess – the fall of the Soviet Union, or the first Gulf War, or the revolution in gay rights.

Is the Quadrangle a work of “exceptional importance” as it must be to be listed on the National Register if it is less than fifty years old? Remember the threshold that applies here is at the local level. I think the case can be made that the Quadrangle complex is a **nationally significant** district in all of its constituent parts based on the arguments made in the nomination and in summary form by me this morning. But even if one may hesitate to go that far, certainly it has been an exceptionally important group to the District of Columbia as a facility and in its physical dimension. Certainly the latest component ranks as among the most architecturally and historically important in the city from the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This ensemble deserves all the legal protection it can get so that it may enrich future generations just as it has for decades.

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