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Smart Stewardship

Dumbarton Oaks Shines as a Renowned Research Institute

By Adam Fry

The creation of Dumbarton Oaks—today one of the world’s premier research institutes—began in 1920, when Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss purchased a circa-1801 Federal-style house and surrounding property in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, D.C. Widely travelled collectors and patrons of the arts and scholarship in the humanities, the Blisses immediately began transforming the home and grounds, adding terraced gardens, a music room, and a new wing to house their extensive collection of Byzantine art.

Having initially acquired six acres of land, the Blisses eventually increased the property to more than 50 acres, and added a library and exhibition pavilions. In 1940, the couple transferred the property to Harvard University, Robert’s alma mater, to establish the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection. The Blisses requested that Dumbarton Oaks “be used for study and research in the Humanities and Fine Arts, with especial emphasis upon Byzantine art and the history and culture of the Eastern Empire in all its aspects.”

The institute’s Pre-Columbian Gallery, designed by noted architect Philip Johnson, opened in 1963, along with a Garden Library. A research library, designed by Venturi, Scott Brown, opened in 2005. In 2008, the Main House underwent an extensive renovation. As an international research institute, library, museum, and garden, Dumbarton Oaks hosts scholarly research, educational programs, conferences, concerts, and digital initiatives. Although access has been limited over the past year, the historical garden and museum annually welcome tens of thousands of visitors on average. The garden has been cited as one of the world’s ten best gardens by *National Geographic*.

Stewardship of a Historical Property: A Studious and Measured Approach

As the steward of Dumbarton Oaks, Harvard University faces the dual challenges of exhibiting world-class collections and supporting advanced scholarship, while preserving and maintaining a historically significant property. To address these challenges, administrators have tapped several top-tier architects and consultants to manage ongoing capital projects and vital upgrades to building systems and existing facilities. These modifications and improvements range from condition assessments and studies to the design of lighting and electrical upgrades, roof replacements, and interior renovations.

Mueller Associates, a mechanical, electrical, and plumbing engineering firm specializing in cultural and historic properties, has supported Dumbarton Oaks on many facility-related projects over the past decade. The studies and upgrades have addressed multiple objectives: improving energy efficiency and conserving resources; enhancing facility conditions to better support the work of scholars; preserving the historical integrity of the structures and grounds; protecting the collections; and creating optimal conditions for the display of art, documents, and artifacts. Mueller has partnered with several architects on these projects—notably Marshall Craft Associates, cox graae + spack architects, Selldorf Architects, and MTF Architecture.

“Harvard University’s stewardship of Dumbarton Oaks has involved a carefully studied, measured approach,” says Steven Gillis, PE, vice president with Mueller Associates. “The university is meticulous in its planning, whether exploring a significant capital improvement or a modest—



but important—upgrade. We have completed several condition assessments and studies that help chart prudent, cost-effective solutions for repairs and improvements while addressing long-term needs. The work is consistently proactive—taking care of facility issues before they become expensive emergencies.”

Preserving a Quiet and Reflective Environment

Considering how best to support scholastic work and protect collections is paramount to Harvard’s facility-planning efforts. In 1939, Mildred Bliss described her vision for the academic environment she planned: “I know that what Dumbarton Oaks has to give—the work that it can do—can never be done in a big center. It must be small and quiet and unemphatic: a place for meditation and *recueillement*.”

Many of the projects have focused on enhancing the environment for scholars’ ongoing research, daily activities for staff, visitor tours, and special events. Lighting upgrades completed in the Main House and Reading Room, for example, have added task lighting, adjustable recessed LED downlights, and dimming systems to optimize energy efficiency and user comfort. The lighting improvements have also enhanced displays of art, while eliminating the UV exposure that can damage light-sensitive manuscripts and documents. HVAC modifications to the circa-1928 Music Room helped reduce ambient noise during performances without compromising the historical interiors.

Other projects have focused on the pool house and loggia, the nearby Fellowship House, and the Director’s Residence. These efforts have included providing an emergency power supply to the pool house, energy improvements to central cooling and heating plant systems, a roof replacement, electrical upgrades, and domestic hot water improvements. Construction is underway to add a dry cooler to the geothermal system at the Fellowship House.

“Many of the projects require careful phasing plans to minimize disruption to the institution’s activities, including individual work as well as special events,” says Gillis. “Whether taking place in one of the main facilities or elsewhere on the grounds, each project requires close coordination among design team members, contractors, and Dumbarton Oaks staff.”

“A Home for the Humanities”

Today, Dumbarton Oaks’ renowned collections include Byzantine and Pre-Columbian art; European art and antique furnishings; and more than 200,000 books, manuscripts, prints, photographs, drawings, and other artifacts. In 1966, Mildred Bliss emphasized that the property was “a home for the humanities” and not simply “a mere aggregation of books and *objets d’art*.” Fortunately, a thoughtful and well-researched approach to the property’s stewardship and unique collections supports her vision and mission to the humanities. 🏛️

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