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U.S. Commission of Fine Arts

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National Capitol Planning Commission

Via website form

Building Over Democracy

The White House grounds are far more than a backdrop to presidential life— they are a national symbol — the People’s House — and part of the White House National Historic Landmark designation. In the early 20th century and before World War II, the grounds were significantly more open to the public, allowing visitors to walk and gather in ways that reflected an idea of democratic access to civic landscapes.

Significant work to unify and shape the site came in 1934–35, when Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. prepared a comprehensive plan that reorganized circulation, preserved long-standing trees, and strengthened the spatial coherence of the grounds after many piecemeal presidential alterations. Olmsted Jr., following the democratic and egalitarian landscape philosophy pioneered by his father, emphasized that such public green spaces should reflect both continuity and accessibility — qualities that help connect generations and embody civic stewardship.

Today, a controversial project to build a roughly 90,000-square-foot structure— complete with offices and a 22,000 square foot ballroom— on the site of the former East Wing is underway under President Donald Trump’s administration. Demolition of portions of the East Wing to prepare for this addition began in late 2025 and has drawn strong criticism from preservationists and legal challenges because it proceeded before full historic review and approval processes were completed, and without broad public input.

This shift — from a landscape historically characterized by relative openness and careful, incremental change to one marked by rapid, large-scale alteration — raises questions about the balance between institutional priorities and democratic restraint. The White House grounds are on public land and carry deep historic values; changes to their form and use resonate beyond architecture and lawn layout. They touch on how we, as a nation, steward shared symbols of democracy and civic life.

When changes are proposed for National Historic Landmarks, especially ones as iconic as the White House grounds, there is a broad expectation — both legal and cultural — that reviews consider not only preservation standards but also public-good values, transparency, and democratic engagement. Without careful consideration of these broader implications, we risk eroding not only bricks, mortar, and green space but the very ideals those grounds are meant to represent.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sue Breitkopf', written in a cursive style.

Sue Breitkopf
President
Olmsted Network