

# They Have Finished Moving 225 Tons of Reimagined Art

With considerable effort, a landscape sculpture featuring huge granite boulders has been transported across Washington, D.C., to its new home at American University.



*Elyn Zimmerman's sculpture "Sudama" at its new home on the campus of American University. Credit Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times*

By Rebecca J. Ritzel

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For four decades, a sculpture of artfully placed granite boulders bordering a reflecting pool occupied the courtyard of an international headquarters in Washington D.C., creating an urban oasis in the shadows of the tall modernist buildings.

But six years ago, the National Geographic Society, decided that the sculpture, known as "Marabar" and designed by the artist Elyn Zimmerman, was in the way of expansion plans for its headquarters, and later agreed to help find it a new home.

Now the boulders, reconfigured a bit but still weighing some 225 tons, surround a different, crescent-shaped reflecting pool in an open sunlit space on the campus of American University.

“One thing I noticed was how much light fell on the whole ensemble,” Zimmerman said.

On Tuesday the university will officially rededicate the sculpture, which has been placed atop a hill between the university’s Kay Spiritual Life Center and Kogod School of Business and alongside a grove of blossoming cherry trees.

Sylvia Burwell, American University’s president, said that within hours of the construction fences coming down, she watched from her office window as students gathered at the sculpture.

“There were so many,” she said. “Some of them contemplating, just sitting and thinking.”

Major works of landscape sculpture are rarely moved, but when they do relocate the process raises all kinds of questions, not just about logistics like who is going to pay for the transportation, but also about how the forms interact in a changed space.

Zimmerman said her goal was to preserve the granite shapes of the five large central boulders that she carefully crafted more than 40 years ago. She shifted the angles slightly and moved seven ancillary ‘garden’ stones closer to the pool than they had been at the National Geographic site. The pool shape was changed to fit the new space.

“What appealed to me about this new location was that it was so very different from the original site of ‘Marabar,’” Zimmerman said. “And the new site dictated a different spatial vocabulary.”

The rededication was a welcome outcome, according to Charles Birnbaum, president of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, which fought to save the sculpture when it no longer fit its original site given National Geographic’s expansion plan.

“You could say that it’s been revived, and make an analogy with the theater,” Birnbaum said. “This is a happy occasion, like a great revival where the original artist is reconceiving the work in a different context, just as playwrights have done for many decades.”





*One of the many changes in the sculpture in its new location is the shape of the pool which is now a crescent. Credit Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times*

Elizabeth Meyer, director of the Landscape Studies Initiative at the University of Virginia, described the relocation effort, which took “Marabar” from one site only to re-emerge as “Sudama” at another, as incredible because Zimmerman had full agency to reimagine and relocate her own work, something that rarely, if ever, happens.

“Marabar,” Zimmerman’s original work, was named after the fictional rock-cut cave referenced in E.M. Forster’s 1924 novel “A Passage to India.” Zimmerman said the novel inspired her in 1977 to visit India where she toured several of the rock-cut temples and caves that Forster’s novel described. Commissioned in 1981, “Marabar” was an immediate success. David Childs, the architect for the society’s 1980s expansion, remembered there was applause at the meeting when the plans for the sculpture were unveiled.

“Sudama” is now a second response to Zimmerman’s trip to India all of those years ago. “There are whole temples carved out of living rock” Zimmerman said. “It’s just astonishing that almost 3000 years ago a pre-mechanical society could create this.”





*At Cold Spring Granite Company, MN. Courtesy Elyn Zimmerman Studio*

For her sculpture, Zimmerman carefully selected the granite quarry blocks at Cold Spring Granite Co. in Minnesota. The final forms were shaped and polished at the granite company under her direction before they were transported to Washington for installation.

But “Marabar” was in the way when the society’s new architect drew up plans to build a entrance pavilion with a rooftop garden and submitted them to the District of Columbia’s Historic Preservation Review Board in 2019. The removal plan drew strong criticism in the art and architecture communities and the society later took the lead in helping to relocate the work at its own expense.

“They stepped up and they did the right thing,” Zimmerman said of the society. “I’m very grateful.”



*At the National Geographic Society headquarters the sculpture, then known as "Marabar," functioned more like an oasis among buildings. Credit Elyn Zimmerman Studio*

Duncan Phillips, a spokesman for the National Geographic Society, said the organization would not disclose how much it spent to relocate Zimmerman's artwork. "We are honored," the society said in a statement, "to donate this important work of art, which has been reimagined by the artist in an installation for this new site, in a setting selected by the artist for quiet contemplation."

Zimmerman took a direct role in the relocation project, which began in 2021 in coordination with the Washington, DC landscape architecture firm LAI, Inc. who were instrumental in overseeing the project. "She controlled every tiny little aspect of this," said Jack Rasmussen, director and curator of American University's Art Museum, and now a chief steward for "Sudama."

Zimmerman was given a choice of eight different sites on the university's 84-acre campus, which was designated as an arboretum two decades ago, and whose initial design, though largely unfulfilled, was drawn up by the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted.



When real estate or other concerns arise, public art installations are usually just removed. A notable example to the contrary is Robert Irwin's "9 Spaces 9 Trees." His 1983 commission was relocated from a plaza adjacent to Seattle's Public Safety Building before that building was demolished. The installation was recreated in 2007 on the University of Washington's nearby campus.

In the initial setting outside Seattle's police headquarters, Irwin's vision of multiple fenced-in areas, each containing a tree, was not always popular with pedestrians. But Meyer of the University of Virginia, said she had always admired the work because of its play with light and division of space, and because its adjacency to a building containing cells invited conversation about incarceration.



*"9 Spaces, 9 Trees" by Robert Irwin on the campus of the University of Washington. Credit via the Washington State Arts Commission; Photo by Kurt Kiefer*

Meyer said the power of that setting is lost now that the work is on a college campus adjacent to an art gallery. "Is it a good thing that Robert Irwin's work was saved but decontextualized or is it a travesty?" she said. "That's the question I ask."

Janae Huber, the collections manager for Art in Public Places at the Washington State Arts Commission, which oversees Irwin's installation, said she believes the work was worth saving, in large part because Irwin was directly involved in reimagining it.

The artist selected new trees for the enclosures, switching from flowering plums to hawthorns, and opted to replace deteriorating blue wiring that surrounded the enclosures in downtown Seattle with a more resilient purple screen. Only the metal frames and some of the benches from the original artwork remain. Most passers-by are probably unaware that Irwin's work once stood next to a jail, Huber said, and now on warm days, she spots students using the enclosures as outdoor library carrels.

"They use it to sit and study, helping people feel solitary on a busy campus, but in a positive way," she said.

"Reasonable people are going to ask, 'Why did they do this?'" Huber said. "History will probably sometimes judge us negatively for the choices that we make, but these are complicated choices. It's never perfect."