

**Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
Section 106 Consulting Parties Meeting #15**

Date: January 18, 2012
Project: Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
Location: 600 Maryland Avenue, SW, 7th Floor NMAAHC Conference Room
Time: 9:30-11:30

Attendees: Sharon Park, SI AHHP
Kinshasha Holman Conwill, Deputy Director NMAAHC
Louise Brodnitz, ACHP
Rodrigo Abela, Gustafson, Guthrie, and Nichol
Jennifer Hirsch, NCPC
Jane Passman, SI OPPM
Sarah Batcheler, CFA
Thomas Luebke, CFA
Daria Gasparini, Robinson & Associates
Amy Ballard, SI AHHP
Ken Walton, NCPC
Patsy Fletcher, AAHGS
Perry Wheelock, NPS
Barbara Faust, SI Gardens
Ann Trowbridge, SI OPPM
Bill Donnelly, SI Gardens/SI OFM&R
Judith Robinson, Robinson & Associates
Dreck Wilson, NTHP and ASALH
Jud McIntire, SI OPPM

MEETING SUMMARY

Sharon Park (SP), SI AHHP, brought the meeting to order at 9:45 a.m. and distributed a handout on the landscape program abstracted from the Freelon Bond Pre-Design Master Facilities Program. SP announced that on display in the back of the conference room was a panoramic photo of Constitution Avenue (from the Lincoln Memorial to the Mall) taken from the Washington Monument Grounds. The photo documents existing conditions of the Washington Monument Grounds and the NMAAHC site before the start of construction. It was produced as part of HABS documentation of the site in fulfillment of Section 106 mitigation requirements.

Ann Trowbridge (AT), SI OPPM, stated that the Final Tier I and Tier II Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) Records of Decision (RODs) were adopted by NCPC on November 3, 2011. AT added that SI would report annually to NCPC and other parties stipulated in the ROD regarding their progress in implementing the Tier I and Tier II EIS design, construction, and operations-related mitigations.

SP noted that SI presented NMAAHC concept design submissions to the agencies in the fall and are moving ahead with site utility work and excavation. Moving forward, SI will work closely with a commissioning agent as well as an exhibit design firm. SP added that there will be an opportunity in the spring for the consulting parties to look at exterior skin materials.

SP welcomed Kinshasha Holman Conwill (KHC), NMAAHC Deputy Director. KHC gave a brief presentation on the museum's public programming, exhibits, and collections. She stated that the museum's principal vision is to use African American history and culture as a lens to learn what it means to be an African American. It will be a place of collaboration and a place to explore and revel in the African American experience. Although the museum does not yet have a building, it has produced a number of exhibits over the years. Through collaborations with many museums and institutions and working with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), it has developed many travelling exhibitions. External collaborations include the StoryCorps Griot Project, among others. Education is at the core of what the museum does, producing demonstrations, films, book signings, lectures, etc. The museum has established the Save Our African American Treasures program, a national collections initiative that brings conservators, photographers, and other specialists to cities across the country. The NMAAHC website acts as virtual presence to engage audiences before the museum building opens. Membership is over 25,000. KHC concluded her presentation by highlighting key aspects of the museum collection including Harriet Tubman materials, a "Jim Crow" railroad car, the *Spirit of Tuskegee* aircraft, and other notable photographs and decorative arts objects.

Dreck Wilson (DW), NTHP and ASALH, asked if the railroad car will be exhibited at the museum. KHC confirmed that it would. SP added that the timing of its installation will be important as it has to be done during construction. Ken Walton (KW), NCPC, asked if the museum has acquired a slave ship for exhibition. KHC replied that there is a possibility that they will get a remnant of a slave ship.

KHC stated that landscape is very important as it is part of the full museum experience. She noted that the landscape concept is still a work in progress. Patsy Fletcher (PF), AAHGS, asked if SI tracks the number of visitors to the landscape versus visitors to the museums. Barbara Faust (BF), SI Gardens, replied that they do not count visitors to the landscape or gardens separately. KHC added that it is an interesting concept to talk about because it is about engaging visitors.

SP introduced Rodrigo Abela (RA), Gustafson, Guthrie, and Nichol, to give an update on the landscape design. RA recounted that the landscape was last presented to the consulting parties in September and that a lot of progress has been made in the months since. RA emphasized that because the site is part of the Washington Monument Grounds and because it will be visited even during the museum's closing hours, the landscape plan focuses on ease of movement through the site. RA explained that the landscape is mainly lawn and trees in order to fit into the larger context of the Washington Monument Grounds. Elms and cherry trees have been placed along the west side of the site to blend in with the palette of the Washington Monument Grounds. Similarly, elm trees are planned for Constitution Avenue and 14th Street to match the urban context. On the interior of the north landscape, however, the designers have introduced a larger diversity of trees.

RA described the landscape along the eastern edge of the site. At the north end the landscape slopes down to 14th Street. In this planted area, color is introduced as a backdrop to the reading groves. The design team is currently researching the potential symbolism of color. In the southeast corner, the landscape is carved out, and a small seating area for outdoor eating has been created. The team is still working out whether this area will feature a permanent armature for vending or a SI vending cart that gets taken in and out. The south landscape is the highpoint of the site, and hedges are used to frame the entrance. RA noted that over 50 percent of the museum is located below ground and that the team is determining the volume of soil depth required for plantings.

RA described the reading groves, which are small groups of trees and seating areas within the broader landscape. Working with the museum, the design team has developed three themes for the reading groves: spirituality, optimism and hope, and resiliency. The reading grove exploring the theme of spirituality is closest to the oculus and features circular benches that can be used by people in a variety of ways. The reading grove exploring the theme of optimism and hope focuses on the concept of people coming together. This area has the best views out to the Washington Monument Grounds. It is designed to be used by both groups and individuals. The metaphor of weaving is used in the reading grove that explores the theme of resiliency. The design of this reading grove features materials of various colors and a variety of seating heights.

Next, RA described the south water feature, which offers a juxtaposition of moving and still water. The south portion of the water feature is tilted up toward the entrance and features moving water. This section of the water feature will be activated to turn on and off at timed intervals. When it is turned on, the moving water will reflect from the bottom of the canopy. When it is turned off, words carved into the surface will be revealed as the water dries. The north portion of the water feature is a still basin. When the water is drained from the section, a quotation carved into the surface of the basin will be revealed. Thomas Luebke (TL), CFA, asked about the design of the moving water. RA explained that the south edge of the water feature is raised about 18 inches and that there is a dry strip between the pavement and the moving water.

TL noted that at the last CFA review, the commissioners urged the designers to be very careful about integrating too many quotations in the design as it can cheapen the message. He also cautioned that it may be difficult to find enough meaningful words to fill up the space under the moving water portion of the water feature. He added that in 10 years, the design may be dated. KHC replied that Lonnie Bunch, NMAAHC Director, takes the issue of using words and quotations in the landscape design very seriously. She added that Mr. Bunch has been meeting with scholars and writers for years and has learned that certain words are touchstones of the African American experience. TL reiterated that the water feature is very large and that as many as 75 words may be needed to fill the space. RA commented that the design team realizes the challenges inherent in the design and plans to create a full-size mock up to work through potential design issues. Sarah Batcheler (SB), CFA, added that a single quotation is often very effective and timeless. RA noted that when the water is on, the design becomes about movement and reflection. When the water is off, the words emerge. The fact that the quotation will not be visible at all times helps avoid having too much texture in the design. KHC reiterated that the museum wants to

achieve balance between what is apparent and what is hidden. She added that the museum is working with the designers to understand the poetics of the space.

Next, RA described the night lighting. The designers are using low-level lighting for the bulk of the site so that the museum does not detract from the Washington Monument and the Capitol. Within the site, lighting will be used to highlight various elements including the porch, the oculus, and the bridges. Night lighting will also be used to make the reading groves and the pathways comfortable for use. On the building itself, night lighting will be diffuse – a light glow behind the metal panels.

SP concluded the landscape presentation, adding that the design team is working on addressing ongoing issues with sustainability, integrated perimeter security, plantings, and maintaining fluidity across the space.

Louise Brodnitz (LB), ACHP, asked for a status update on the research tasks SI agreed to as part of Section 106 mitigation. SP replied that SI is researching and working on a preservation plan for the Bulfinch Gateposts, completing HABS photo documentation of the Washington Monument Grounds, researching the Horatio Greenough sculpture of George Washington, and working with NPS on transferring funds for implementing the Washington Monument Grounds planting plan. SP also reported that SI will be documenting the nineteenth-century culvert tunnel that runs under the site. An archaeologist will record the dimensions and details of its construction. SP noted that the tunnel appears on an Army Corps of Engineers map from 1890. Perry Wheelock (PW), NPS, added that NPS is dealing with a similar culvert tunnel as part of the levy project, noting that they were originally constructed as water intake tunnels used for heating.

DW stated that for a long time he has advocated for a comprehensive landscape program similar to the comprehensive architectural program that was created for the building, which resulted in a brilliant design. DW stated that he thought the site and landscape design does not rise up to the level of the building design. He commented that the dilemma with the conceptual landscape plan is that it is culturally deaf and blind to the African American experience. He believes that the plant palette is unacceptable and could easily be reworked to relate to the African American culture. He noted the National Zoo landscape as a successful design. SP replied that while the design is fully in the purview of the museum, NMAAHC has been thinking about the issues DW has raised. SP added the landscape design adheres to the design principles and that this does not preclude the possibility of addressing his points. KHC acknowledged that all public comments are welcome, but added that by process the building design will evolve first before a serious discussion of the landscape can take place. The landscape is on a different track, but she has discussed the comments DW raised with the museum director. There are options for exploring different programmatic themes in consultation with SI gardeners. KHC reiterated that the overall context of the plan is the Washington Monument Grounds and the Mall. RA stated that the design team has not yet nailed down the plant palette. SB asked if DW was requesting a curated collection of plants. TL asked if DW could provide specific examples of plants that relate to the African American experience. DW replied that he would like to see a mix of plantings and noted that Booker T. Washington was noted for planting wisteria trees on the Tuskegee campus. He

added that in the musical arena, there are references to the bitter fruit and the scrub oak. DW stated that with the correct knowledge, it would not be very difficult to create a total palette for various spaces. DW also mentioned that there is a lot of lawn area in the design and questioned if this was contrary to sustainability goals. RA noted that they are looking into using a subsurface drip system for the lawn.

KHC acknowledged that finding the poetics of the landscape was more of an art than a science. The design will have to balance what is literally interpreted in the landscape versus what is interpreted through exhibits and guides. The museum wants to tell a story that is comprehensive, not encyclopedic. KHC reiterated that the museum is taking all comments under consideration.

LB stated that DW has been making these comments about the landscape program repeatedly and she does not feel that they are being adequately addressed. She thinks that the design of the landscape does not have the specificity and power of the building design. She believes the reading groves have a random quality and suggested bringing in a cultural historian to develop ways to make the grounds more specific to the African American experience.

DW said that he is thrown off by the term “reading grove.” KHC responded that she thinks they are literally serendipitous places to find rest and read and also gathering spaces that can be programmed for museum visitors and users. She disagrees with the issue of specificity, noting that the ring shout referenced in the design of one of the reading groves is a profound cultural touchstone that permeates African American literature. She added that sacred groves and hush harbors have great resonance in the culture. She feels the reading groves serve as poetic spaces rather than didactic. DW agrees that the circular geometries are very culturally sensitive, but that the materials are not.

PW commented that, in her experience, there is great value in designing very simple, flexible spaces that can evolve and adjust to different uses over time.

KHC added that the museum has been talking about where temporary and permanent public art may live in the landscape.

SP thanked everyone for attending. She announced that the groundbreaking ceremony will be held on February 22nd and that the consulting parties will be invited to attend the simulcast at the Baird Auditorium. There will be a spring consulting parties meeting to discuss the Corona and final exterior materials and a fall consulting parties meeting to discuss the final design. SP adjourned the meeting at 11:40 a.m.