

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF PLANNING



June 7, 2010

Ms. Sharon Park
Historic Preservation Officer
Smithsonian Institution
600 Maryland Avenue, SW, Suite 5001
Washington, D.C. 20013-7012

Dear Sharon:

I am following up on our telephone conversation last week about the status of consultation on the Smithsonian's National Museum of African-American History and Culture. These comments are submitted as part of our ongoing consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

In the Smithsonian's presentation at the most recent consultation meeting, as you know I was very surprised to hear the architectural team begin with the statement that the proposed museum building had been moved "by consensus" to align with the National Museum of American History. The team then proceeded to describe only the development of that single architectural scheme. As I made clear in our phone conversation, there is no such consensus on location, and the Smithsonian has not informed the State Historic Preservation Office that it is no longer considering alternatives or developing only a single preferred design.

At the previous discussion of alternatives the SHPO attended with the architectural team, we recommended specifically, among other comments, that the "plaza scheme" be considered further as a distinct and promising alternative that might reduce adverse effects on historic properties. At the time, the architectural team spoke highly of that approach and its potential to engage the landscape and architectural context of the site in a way that could benefit the museum and the city. There was a lively and productive discussion of their ideas among the consulting parties, as expected during Section 106 consultation.

The core purpose of consultation with the SHPO is to ensure that alternatives to a proposed action are fully considered before decisions are made. Before the Smithsonian dismisses an alternative from consideration, our view is that it must develop that alternative in consultation with the other parties to a degree sufficient to determine whether any potential concerns about the approach can be addressed through further development or refinement. If the Smithsonian finds problems with an alternative, it must inform the parties what those concerns are and give them an opportunity to make suggestions that might lead to a resolution of those concerns. This did not occur before the architect's report of a "consensus" on a single direction.

We appreciate the copy you provided last week of the Smithsonian's recent presentation to the Commission of Fine Arts. That document and other materials you have distributed is very helpful in analyzing the various alternatives, and we recognize and appreciate the work that you and the project team have put into preparing these exhibits. Nonetheless, the Section 106 consultation process would be expedited by clearer information in some areas, so as to allow the parties to evaluate fully and quickly specific effects of alternatives on the historic context. Some of the comparative materials that are being used for analysis are at such a small scale that it can be very difficult to draw conclusions beyond a general approximation, leading to protracted discussion on the basis of ambiguities.

For the handful of core issues that we believe are essential to discuss at this stage, we would appreciate your providing the following information to allow for a clear analysis, understanding, and discussion of distinct choices that differ greatly in their effect on historic properties (if any of this information has already been provided, please remind us of the documents):

Site Layout and Dimensions

- A plan of the site showing the 445-foot setback line from the Mall axis established by the McMillan Commission, and the centerlines of the four rows of elms on the north side of the Mall;
- A plan of the Mall showing the dimensions of the setbacks of the Mall museums from the central axis and the flanking Avenues (Constitution and Independence);

Building Dimensions

- Elevations of the main cornice height and maximum height of the Mall museums, Federal Triangle, and Auditor's Building;
- Dimensions of the "corona" (height and width) for the proposed museum in the alternatives and the competition submission;
- Diagrams showing the cornice and maximum heights of other key museums superimposed on the proposed museum elevation;

Analytical Site Views of the Various Schemes

- The view to the Federal Triangle from the north walkway to the Washington Monument, taken from the walkway beginning at 17th Street;
- The view to the Federal Triangle from the north oval walkway around the Washington Monument, taken from the point where the walkway is tangent to a line drawn from the center of the Mellon Auditorium portico;
- The view to the museum site from the front terrace of the National Museum of American History, taken from in front of the Mall entrance; and

- The view to the museum site from the fountain plaza at the north entrance of the National Museum of American History.

While the analytical views you have already provided are instructive, they also highlight some basic questions that need to be answered through further visual analysis. These additional views will clarify the most important differences among key schemes in terms of their relative effects on historic properties and the civic setting. I will be glad to explain my reasoning further at our meeting this week, and would also be pleased to work with you to focus this effort so that it can be accomplished in the most expeditious way.

As always, I look forward to continuing a productive discussion with the Smithsonian on this transformative project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Maloney". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right and then loops back down to the left.

David Maloney
State Historic Preservation Officer
for the District of Columbia