

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF PLANNING



June 22, 2010

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

Dear Sharon:

I very much appreciate the reassurances in your letter of June 11, and the Smithsonian's commitment to further dialogue and consideration of alternatives during the Section 106 review process for the National Museum of African American History and Culture. We look forward to a continued productive consultation with your team.

Let me also reiterate our understanding of the importance of this museum and the complexity of planning and building a major structure at this location. While the design task is an extremely difficult one, we believe that a thoughtful and patient exploration of all ideas without preconceptions is the way to move forward toward a final design that fully meets the challenge of the site. This will be the most profound change to occur on the Washington Monument grounds in a generation, and there is only one chance to get it right.

Last week the representatives of the participating government agencies agreed that it would be useful for us to state our thoughts as fully as possible, and thus the purpose of this letter. We understand that your project team plans to meet in New York this week, and we hope that these comments will be helpful for that meeting.

As you know, the SHPO's conclusion from the series of analytical photos of the various schemes is that while the museum will have little if any negative effect on the axial Mall and Ellipse vistas, it will if sited as a large block in the center of the site have major adverse effects on other critical views identified by the consulting parties after long discussion. These views include the "iconic" view of the Washington Monument from the northeast corner of the monument grounds and the exceptional panoramic views of the Federal Triangle complex from most of the grounds and even from as far away as Arlington House.

While the importance of the Washington Monument and Mall axes is obvious, the Triangle and adverse effects on it cannot be relegated to secondary consideration. The Triangle and particularly the Constitution Avenue composition is among the most impressive sights the city has to offer, and an inseparable part of the National Mall experience. As historic architecture of its type, the Triangle is without peer in the United States. It is not just from the procedural

standpoint of the National Historic Preservation Act that we encourage the Smithsonian to take maximum efforts to avoid harm to this feature of the historic environment.

We do not expect this environment to remain unchanged. There will be a dramatic change, but we also see it as an opportunity to enrich the area with new designed relationships among landmarks and the landscape. As stated in my earlier letter, we believe further exploration of a more developed composition of various building elements interacting with the landscape can lessen the effects on key views and help to establish meaningful new ones.

One of the key planning issues for the National Mall today is the need to balance grand impressive symbolism with an attention to the personal experience of millions of visitors. Both L'Enfant and the McMillan Commission were keenly aware of the need to balance grand gestures with welcoming settings for ordinary public life, including comforts and amenities suitable for the city's climate. The places they emulated (like Versailles) and which your design team cites as models (like Stowe) were meant to impress, but they were also meant for the simple pleasure and delight of the people who lived and walked around in them. They were complex environments made up of not just awe-inspiring vistas, but also picturesque views among multiple landmarks, simple surprises, and more intimate walks through nature. A substantial amount of the public discussion today among scholars, journalists, and participants in the public review process is about the need to maintain a hierarchy of humanizing and vitalizing elements in the city's public environment. We believe a primary task for this design is to fit the building comfortably to the scale and experience of visitors walking around the National Mall area.

We continue to reiterate the point that the site is not part of the Mall proper, and should not become merely an extension of a rigid line-up of monumental buildings that relate only to the Mall axis and not to each other or to other features of the context. Endless perpetuation of this model will stultify Washington's urbanism. The museum should add respectfully to the greater Mall composition, but it can also maintain the naturalistic landscape of its site, express contemporary design ideas, and preserve or establish multiple visual relationships among landmarks and the surrounding landscape.

To this end, we believe the project would benefit from further conceptualization of the building and landscape as an entity, with consideration of the way users view and arrive at focal buildings. At this location, aside from multiple views from the adjacent landscape, there is a natural flow of pedestrians from 14th and Constitution Avenue toward the Monument, and it may be possible to use this as an opportunity to draw the public along a line of engagement with the museum. This could become both a practical and symbolic gesture on the approach to the Monument.

A topographic notion that might prove useful in this regard is that the site straddles a former shoreline. As your archaeological study revealed, the original south bank of Tiber Creek runs across the site diagonally from 14th and Constitution toward the southwest, as the creek became an estuary nearing its confluence with the Potomac. Even as it is now urbanized, the landscape here retains the sense of opening out onto the "flats" around the Monument and flowing with the pull of the Mall axis toward the river. Since water is an element that you expect to incorporate

into the landscape program, it may be possible to incorporate water in a symbolic way along this former shore.

In similar fashion, the orientation of the building might productively be adjusted to reflect an anchoring in the elemental meeting of earth and water, rather than in the formal geometric construct of the Mall, which is entirely a product of the European tradition. Beyond the symbolic, an orientation that is not orthogonal, but inherent to the land could provide multiple benefits—better relating the building to the irregularity of the site, opening up critical diagonal views to the Monument and Federal Triangle, and disposing open space more usefully around the building. This could create both more commodious primary gathering places, as well as a useful easing of space in other locations like the vehicular entry from 14th Street. It could also help to avoid the forbidding condition at the National Museum of American History, where the greenbelt is too broad to allow the museum to engage the street, yet not substantial enough to allow for developed landscape areas.

In terms of the museum design, we recognize the corona as the signature image and do not find its boldness inherently at odds with the historic context. Nonetheless, the scale of the main museum block relative to its context is a key concern of the review process, and we believe this aspect of the design deserves careful consideration. We appreciate your willingness to add clarity about needed reference points for further discussion about height, setback, and massing issues.

With some of the museum program proposed underground, your interest in adding light into these spaces also offers opportunities to address other objectives for landscape and scale. The addition of secondary building elements, whether skylights, entry or display pavilions, or portions of the building program in the manner suggested by the “plaza scheme” could provide benefits overall. Such elements would add an intermediate architectural scale that is helpful in relating the museum to surrounding historic structures. It could also help to preserve existing views, shape new designed views, and create more intimate public areas. We encourage you to consider these possibilities further.

Again, we look forward to continuing our productive discussion with the Smithsonian and very much appreciate your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,

David Maloney
State Historic Preservation Officer
for the District of Columbia