

General Composition of the National Mall

The National Mall at the heart of Monumental Washington presents a unity of overall spatial design but is composed of distinct parts, including the historic Mall east of 14th Street, the Washington Monument Grounds, and West Potomac Park. Though administratively separate, the Ellipse, White House Grounds, and Capitol Grounds are also part of this extended landscape composition. The museum site occupies a highly prominent location at the juncture of the east-west axis of the National Mall from the U.S. Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial and the north-south axis from the White House to the Jefferson Memorial

- The design of the museum must respect the character and the history of the monumental core as it has evolved through seminal plans, most notably the L'Enfant Plan and McMillan Plan, but also including the Victorian-era and mid-20th-century plans. The addition of a large structure in the midst of this historic environment must be accomplished in a way that is harmonious and respectful of existing hierarchies.
- The design must consider long views within the National Mall, as well as distant views from higher locations, such as Arlington Cemetery, the Old Post Office Pavilion, the Washington Monument itself, and from the air; it must not detract from panoramic views that open and widen on the approach to the Washington Monument Grounds from the National Mall or the Ellipse.
- The spatial organization of the National Mall is cross-axial, marked by the Washington Monument at the crossing. The museum is situated at a "hinge" where the surrounding frame of buildings will reach its closest approach to the Monument. The museum should be a distinctive part of this frame, yet must recognize its role in the larger composition of the National Mall, particularly in turning the long view between the cross-axes.

Context of the Washington Monument Grounds

The site is located on the Washington Monument Grounds. The setting is if the tallest and most prominent structure in the monumental core, this 72-acre reservation is characterized by Olmstedian design principles and informal, irregular, and asymmetrical effects. Notable elements include open lawns, intermittent groupings of trees, and curvilinear paths and roads that create a sequential experience of changing picturesque and panoramic views.

- The design of the museum must be respectful of the Washington Monument and its scale and design character and must not detract from its preeminence; its proximity to the Monument requires that this physical relationship be carefully controlled in the design of the building, in terms of placement, size, shape, orientation, landscaping, and illumination.
- The design of the museum and its site should be informed by the naturalistic topography of the Grounds and the distinct characteristics of this historic environment. The site is part of the foreground peripheral "flats" from which the land gradually rises to the central mound; built features include the Monument Lodge, the Bulfinch Gateposts, and curvilinear pathways.
- The design must address the museum's effects on the definition, character, and views of the Grounds as seen and experienced from within the reservation as a whole. The building will substantially alter the Grounds; the design of the site should be associated with the surrounding larger landscape rather than appearing as the insertion of an unrelated landscape. The design must maintain a fluidity of movement across the site by integrating new pathways to the existing landscape of the Grounds.

Relationship to Adjacent Architectural and Urban Context

The site is at the convergence of three distinct contexts - the historic Mall, the Washington Monument Grounds, and the urban grid of the adjacent city. To the east of the site is a series of museum structures with an established pattern of height, setbacks, and site coverage; these help define the formal landscape of the Mall with its expansive panels of lawn flanked by double allée of trees. To the south and west is the open park landscape that extends past the Washington Monument to the Potomac River. To the north, the monumental Federal Triangle creates a more solid urban street wall that frames the composition of the National Mall.

- The placement, shape, and orientation of the museum must address its relation to each of its adjacent contexts. The museum will be located at the western end of a sequence of museum buildings facing the National Mall, and while its design should recognize this unique position, its massing must not exceed the prevailing height nor protrude beyond prevailing setback of the primary building volumes (not terraces) of the museums along the National Mall and Constitution Avenue.
- All sides of the building, including the roof, will be highly visible and should be treated as public facades. The appearance of service and support functions should be eliminated to the greatest extent possible by placing them below grade, and any requisite perimeter security should be designed and integrated into the facility from the earliest concept design to be compatible with the character of the building and site.
- The design of the museum and its site circulation should also recognize the important non-cardinal views and direction of approach to this site, in particular the corner street crossings, the historic National Mall pathways, and the diagonal relationships with the Washington Monument, the Ellipse, and the Old Post Office tower.