

These comments are in response to the Smithsonian Institution's invitation to the public to present opinions concerning "how the design and construction of the National Museum of African American History and Culture might affect the historic properties within or near its 'Area of Potential Effect'" as part of the Section 106 review process.

March 31, 2011

The National Museum of African American History and Culture will be an important addition to the Smithsonian Institution because it will chronicle and display the important contributions that African Americans have made to the nation's history and culture. The issue here concerns the effect the design of the building proposed for the museum would have on the setting it will occupy on the Mall. The buildings that establish that setting have a distinctive and identifiable architectural, urban, and historical character. The design proposed for this building is so very different it can only have a negative effect on that area.

The building's design as proposed is unlike that of any other building near it on the mall or contiguous to the mall. Each one of the buildings that would be its neighbors is based on the broad principles of classical design that have long been identified with the government and people of the United States. The buildings predating World War II are more overtly classical and explicitly evoke the great classical buildings of this country running back to Thomas Jefferson and beyond and to buildings in other countries as far back as ancient Greece. They call to mind the origins of the institutions of our political and cultural life that were founded and nurtured in nations that sought justice in their laws and beauty in their buildings. The neighboring buildings that postdate the war are less explicitly classical, but their proportions, massing, forms, and materials nonetheless link them with their predecessors running from the White House and the Capitol down to the National Gallery of Art's west wing. With greater or lesser success all of these buildings succeed in doing what the architects of the National Museum of African American History and Culture state about architecture: "At its best, architecture is the physical manifestation of a culture's highest ideals."

The proposed building does not manifest the highest ideals of American culture, a culture in which African Americans have played a fundamental role and which they have enriched immeasurably. The building's design calls attention to itself as something distinctly different from any other building. Its neighboring buildings provide interpretations of enduring ideals about beauty in architecture that have been adapted to serve particular functions as that arose at particular times. They show how those functions contribute to the ongoing enrichment and constant change in American culture. In them it is clear that expressing continuity is more important than expressing momentary and transient tastes in architecture. In this way these neighboring buildings are like the nation's laws that use enduring principles of justice as their guide in formulating ways to address new problems that expand the opportunities for all in their pursuit of happiness.

The building design proposed here is quite different. It seeks to be distinctive by being different: different proportions, different massing, different forms, and different materials. These differences have earned it praise for being “of its time.” All buildings are of their time. Every one of its neighbors is different and “of its time,” but they complement one another and contribute to the harmonious visual impression of the capital because they also have similarities, and those similarities finally outweigh the differences.

The buildings that will be its neighbors also call to mind other buildings throughout the nation that serve important governmental and cultural institutions. Their similarities reveal the continuity within American culture, and their differences make a vivid representation of the diversity within that continuity. This building’s design cannot be seen as a part of that continuity. Nor can it be seen, as the best among the other buildings can be seen, as a “physical manifestation of a culture's highest ideals.” Its presence here would only demean the architectural, urban, and historical character of the area that is the subject of this review, and it is unworthy of the noble purpose that it seeks to serve.

Over the past two decades new buildings in cities across the nation have made it abundantly clear that there are many architects who have the talent to design a building that would be worthy of this site and a symbol of this institution. Unfortunately, none of these architects were included in the competition that led to the present proposal. It is not too late to reconsider how this important museum can be given a home that is a respected addition to the Smithsonian and to the national capital’s Mall. We urge you to use this review to provide the opportunity to make that happen.

The following signees are members of the School of Architecture, University of Notre Dame

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