

# STAFF RECOMMENDATION

NWitherell

NCPC File No. 6479



**PATENT OFFICE BUILDING  
COURTYARD ENCLOSURE  
7<sup>th</sup> and F Streets, NW  
Washington, DC**

Submission by the Smithsonian Institution

July 1, 2004

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## Abstract

The Smithsonian Institution has submitted a design concept for a glass canopy to enclose the courtyard of the Patent Office Building, which houses two museums of the Smithsonian Institution that will reopen to the public in July 2006 following a complete rehabilitation of the building. The concept presented to the Commission is the winning competition entry of Foster and Partners. The canopy will be designed and constructed as a design-build project.

The Smithsonian was authorized by Congress in 2003 to “plan, design, and construct improvements to the interior and exterior of the Patent Office Building (including the construction of a roof covering the courtyard) . . . subject to the review and approval of the Commission” and also subject to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

## Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of design concept pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 8722(d) and Section 5 of the National Capital Planning Act (40 U.S.C. § (b)(1)).

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## Executive Director’s Recommendation

The Commission:

**Approves** the concept of a glass canopy to enclose the courtyard of the Patent Office Building, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 21.00(08.21)-41385, provided that the profile of the canopy, particularly the center vault, is redesigned and lowered so that it is not visible from Mount Vernon Square and the National Archives, in order to preserve the appearance of the Patent Office in the 8<sup>th</sup> Street viewshed.

**Supports** the Smithsonian's vision for the renewal and expansion of the museums' contribution to the life of the city and the nation.

**Requires** the Smithsonian, in the submission of preliminary site and building plans, to provide:

- Documentation showing the physical connection of the canopy to the building.
- Further information on the proposed materials.
- Further information on the mechanical equipment enclosure above the canopy.
- Plans and elevations for other proposed alterations to the courtyard, including to the building's courtyard facades and floor.
- Plans and elevations for other exterior alterations to the building, such as the provisions for handicapped accessibility and for physical security barriers, if anticipated.
- Completed environmental documentation.
- Documentation of substantial progress in the Section 106 consultation.

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## PROJECT SUMMARY

### Site, Setting, and Vistas

The Patent Office Building is bounded by 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets and F and G Streets, NW. It fills Reservation #8, one of the most prominent reservations in the L'Enfant Plan, situated on the high ridge parallel to F and G Streets, NW and originally envisioned as the site of a national nondenominational church. The building was begun with the south façade in 1836 from a design by Town and Elliott selected by President Andrew Jackson, who also selected architect Robert Mills to oversee construction. The building was constructed in four phases over three decades, and the facades are remarkably consistent given the long construction period. The Patent Office Building--its central location, Greek Revival style, and original purpose--is well known to the Commission and public as an exemplar of the achievements and ideals of the Jacksonian era. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965.

The exterior of the Patent Office has remained remarkably intact without significant alteration through the years, with a notable exception occurring in 1936, when the south portico stair was removed in order to straighten F Street. The Commission was instrumental in restoring the historic alignment of F Street when it approved the MCI Arena in 1995.

The reservation and the building are connected visually to other L'Enfant Plan elements by the projection of the building's porticos into the east-west F and G Street rights-of-way. They are also connected through views along the north-south 8<sup>th</sup> Street right-of-way. The building forms an element of the axis between Carnegie Library/City Museum at Mount Vernon Square and the National Archives at Pennsylvania Avenue (and farther south, to the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden).

The long views of the building have been planned for and protected to the extent possible in the urban design of the city. (The Techworld bridge is a significant intrusion.) John Russell Pope designed the National Archives in the 1930s with a reciprocating façade, marked prominently by the portico and pediment. The Navy Memorial and Market Square buildings were designed in the 1980s to enhance and frame the vista in both directions. The Patent Office Building's portico is the focus of attention at the north end of this segment. The Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation created guidelines for private development in order to protect the 8<sup>th</sup> Street vista between F Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. The viewshed is protected, as well, through the National Register designations of the Patent Office and of the L'Enfant Plan.

### Background

The Smithsonian Institution (SI) has submitted a concept design for a canopy to enclose the open central courtyard of the Patent Office Building, which houses the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The building is currently undergoing a significant, multi-year interior and exterior renovation and will reopen to the public in July 2006. The building has undergone several previous periods of significant interior renovation, most recently when the building was converted for use by the museums in the mid-1960s.

The Smithsonian envisions, and is planning and designing for, a repositioning of the museums in the public life of Washington and the nation. It plans to achieve this through the renovation of interior exhibit and monumental spaces, as well as through programming new uses for the courtyard, which has previously been open to the sky. The courtyard will become an enclosed space that will continue to be the setting for a café but will also be used evenings and year-round for a variety of cultural and social activities. Toward that end, the Smithsonian held an invited competition last winter that was won by Foster and Partners of London.

### Proposal

The enclosure will be achieved by an undulating canopy of fritted glass on a stainless steel grid, supported on eight textured stainless steel columns within the courtyard. The architects describe the canopy as a "warped lattice shell" that will provide climate control, an acoustical environment appropriate for events in the courtyard, and sufficient natural light for the surrounding galleries. The canopy will be completely attached to the building by glass walls directly beneath the canopy's edge so that the interior climate can be controlled, but it is supported by the columns that will also drain the water from the roof. The canopy is shaped in three convex forms, which function structurally as vaults supported by the columns. The center

vault is wider and higher than the two side vaults and projects substantially above the cornice level, especially above the pediments.

The approximate distance from the courtyard floor to the Patent Office Building's cornice is 59 feet. The distance to the ridge of the pedimented south portico is another ten feet, or 69 feet. This is also the approximate level of the lowest point of the underside of the canopy (over the four corner columns). The distance to the underside of the smaller side vaults is 80 feet. The distance to the underside of the center vault is 91 feet.

### Development Program

Applicant: Smithsonian Institution  
Architects: Foster and Partners; Smith Group  
Project cost: Estimated \$25 million  
Completion date: Canopy, January 2006; Museum reopening, July 2006

## PROJECT ANALYSIS

### Executive Summary

The staff recommends that the canopy, particularly the center vault, be redesigned and lowered to be not visible in the 8<sup>th</sup> viewshed from Mount Vernon Square and the National Archives. The canopy should be an interior feature to be experienced from the courtyard and adjacent galleries.

### Analysis

The proposed enclosure of the courtyard will enhance the perception and use of the Patent Office and the two museums housed there. The staff applauds the Smithsonian's desire to reprogram the museums to add to the life of the city and activity downtown.

The staff believes that the Smithsonian has striven to find a balance between two objectives: the creation of a dynamic new form and image for the museums, and continued regard for the historic appearance and significance of the building. The solution to the first objective might have been an even more dramatic and distinct roof form (if it were more sculptural and functioned more like a work of art) to signal the museum purpose, although the retention of the building's historic integrity and the significant views of it would have been even more difficult to achieve successfully in that case. The solution to the second objective might have been a low, hip-roofed, conservatory-style glass ceiling that would not have drawn attention to itself but that also might not have achieved environmental and acoustical (much less artistic) objectives.

The staff believes that the attempt to balance these two objectives is at the heart of the design problem and that the ideal solution has not yet been achieved.

The center vault seems intended to hover closely over the central pediments and to mimic or reflect their rise, but in reality the central vault is too high and too foreign a form in relation to

the pediments to be compatible with the building. The vault fundamentally changes the profile and the historic character of the building at the point of its most significant exterior views. The Greek Revival-style building is simple, legible, linear, even delicate in some respects. The form and pattern of the canopy seem, in contrast, to be complex, dynamic, organic, almost baroque. The proportion and form of the central vault create a jarring juxtaposition with the proportion and form of the building, in the staff's opinion. The design of the canopy requires restudy to resolve the incompatibility.

At the same time, the canopy admirably solves many of the structural challenges inherent in enclosing the Patent Office Building's open courtyard and in creating an interior space that is acoustically and environmentally appealing. The vaults allow the canopy to rest on eight columns that are approximately 2'4" in diameter. While the columns and canopy will be a noticeable change for those who knew the courtyard before, it's a relatively open solution for an enclosed space. The flare of the canopy allows the interior cornice of the building to be exposed from the courtyard. Further, the canopy is an exciting form, an undulating sweep that will cast changing shadows against the courtyard walls, create an image and generate the attention the Smithsonian seeks for its new programming, and be commensurate in quality with the building and the institution.

*This desired new image need not occur on the exterior of the building in order to be successful for the institution.* The future courtyard excitement seems entirely appropriate for a building that contains more exuberant and polychromatic interiors than one might suspect from looking at its Greek Revival-style exterior. The director of the National Portrait Gallery has spoken eloquently about the character of these interior Victorian-era spaces and about his desire to achieve a similar excitement for the courtyard. The design of the canopy will create a significant "wow" factor for everyone walking into the courtyard or experiencing it from the adjacent exhibition galleries.

In addition, the glass canopy at a lower height will still appropriately convey the most significant change in the programming of the downtown institution to the public; the light emanating from the courtyard in the evenings will signal the reinvigoration of the museums and the expansion of programmed activities.

Therefore, the staff recommends that the Smithsonian and its architects redesign and lower the canopy, particularly the center vault, so that the desired qualities are retained for the interior of the building but so that the vault is not visible from Mount Vernon Square and the National Archives.

## CONFORMANCE

### Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

Applicable policies include:

The distinguishing original quality or character of historic properties should be protected. The removal or alteration of any historically valuable material or distinctive architectural feature should be avoided when possible and kept to minimum when required for

continued use. The design of additions should be compatible with the height, scale, materials, color, texture, and character of the historic property.

New construction on historic landmarks or in historic districts should be compatible with the historical architectural character and cultural heritage of the landmark or district. In design, height, proportion, mass, configuration, building materials, texture, color, and location, new construction should complement these valuable features of the landmark or district, particularly features in the immediate vicinity to which the new construction will be visually related.

Special Streets and Places [8<sup>th</sup> Street, a significant cross-axis in the L'Enfant Plan, was designated a Special Street in the 1984 Comprehensive Plan] should be maintained and enhanced in a manner that promotes their roles as major features that help establish the images and the symbols of the National Capital in the minds of its residents and visitors.

The existing street space and the buildings fronting on Special Streets and Places should be maintained, protected, and enhanced. Any repair, maintenance, improvement or new building should respect the historic elements, enhance the aesthetic quality, and promote the amenity of this space.

#### National Environmental Policy Act

In February 2003 the Smithsonian Institution developed an Environmental Assessment (EA) for renovation work to the POB. The POB EA stated that the courtyard canopy would not be visible above the cornice. That document, completed by the Smithsonian Institution, has not been adopted by NCPC. The currently submitted canopy design departs from the stated objectives of the initial EA conclusion regarding the courtyard canopy, which was that it not be visible from the exterior.

The staff and Commission as a whole have not acted upon any exterior design modifications of the building's features anticipated or completed during the current renovation. This outcome was the result of the Smithsonian staff's reluctance to submit exterior building modifications to the Commission until after the standing of the Smithsonian Institution's historic preservation responsibilities was clarified. That was accomplished through legislation in September 2003.

Staff has recently reminded Smithsonian project representatives that a supplemental EA must be developed by the Smithsonian Institution to address the now evident potential for important visual effects from the proposed canopy design. The Smithsonian has verbally committed to developing a revised EA which will evaluate the visual impact of the canopy design on the building and on various visual corridors adjacent to the project site area. That document must be completed prior to the preliminary design submission of the proposed canopy. NCPC staff has also noted that the Smithsonian Institution should identify the Commission as a cooperating agency in the pending revised EA in compliance with the NCPC Environmental and Historic Preservation procedures.

## National Historic Preservation Act

Along with the U.S. Treasury and the General Post Office (now the Hotel Monaco), the Patent Office is one of the three monumental federal office buildings initiated with Robert Mills in the 1830s in the second generation of construction in the nation's capital following the earlier construction of the White House and executive branch complex and the U.S. Capitol. The Washington Monument is Mills' fourth significant project in the nation's capital. (In addition, Mills was the runner-up in the Smithsonian Castle competition and was its superintending architect.) At the Patent Office, Mills was replaced in 1852 by architect Thomas U. Walter, who completed the building.

The Patent Office was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965, is sited on a contributing reservation of the L'Enfant Plan, and is within the Downtown Historic District and the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site. Given the building's status as a National Historic Landmark, the Smithsonian is required "to the maximum extent possible [to] undertake such planning and actions as may be necessary to minimize harm to any National Historic Landmark that may be directly and adversely affected by an undertaking."

SI has initiated consultation with the D.C. State Historic Preservation Office. In a meeting on June 14, 2004, the SI staff stated that it has determined that the project will have an adverse effect on the National Historic Landmark. The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation has not yet been formally invited to participate in the Section 106 review and therefore has not yet been provided a reasonable opportunity to comment on the project.

SI will begin formal consultation this summer. A meeting has been scheduled for July 21, 2004. Given the National Historic Landmark designation, the SI must invite the Advisory Council and the Secretary of the Interior (represented by the National Historic Landmark staff of the National Park Service's regional office) to participate, and also invite the interested public to become consulting parties. Commission staff will participate in the consultation.

Commission staff anticipates that the identified effects of the proposed canopy will include the change to the appearance and character of the courtyard, the change in the exterior appearance of the building, and the change in the views of the Patent Office Building in the 8<sup>th</sup> Street right-of-way, particularly its relationship to the National Archives. The physical attachment of the canopy to the building fabric will also be the subject of discussion.

## CONSULTATION

### Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed this item at its meeting on June 16, 2004 and forwarded the proposal to the Commission with the statement that the project had been coordinated by all agencies participating with the exception of the D.C. Office of Planning (OP). The OP representative has withheld coordination pending further consultation with OP staff, including the DC State Historic Preservation Officer, especially with regard to the alteration in the building when seen in the 8<sup>th</sup> Street vista from the Navy Memorial and National Archives. The

participating agencies were: NCPC, the District Department of Transportation, the District Department of Housing and Community Development, the General Services Administration, and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

Commission of Fine Arts

CFA endorsed the concept at its June 17, 2004 meeting, requesting further design development details soon, and focusing the meeting discussion on the proposed alterations to the courtyard. The letter to the Smithsonian Institution is attached.