

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

NCPC File No. 6479



PATENT OFFICE BUILDING

G Street Accessible Ramps
7th and F Streets, NW
Washington, D.C.

Submission by the Smithsonian Institution

July 28, 2005

Abstract

The Smithsonian Institution has submitted plans for the construction of a pair of ramps on the north façade of the Patent Office Building in order to provide an accessible entrance to the building's museums that complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The previous accessible route, which was not in compliance with ADA, followed the descent of the loading dock ramps and passed through the parking garage in the lowest level of the building to a staff elevator.

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of preliminary and final site and building plans pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 8722(d) and Section 5 of the National Capital Planning Act (40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1)).

Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

Approves the preliminary and final site and building plans for the construction of a pair of ramps to provide an accessible entrance on the G Street (north) façade of the Patent Office Building, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 21.10(38.00)41642.

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Site

The Patent Office Building occupies Reservation 8, a central element of the L'Enfant Plan, and is itself a prominent building in the Plan and Downtown Washington. Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1971, the building was constructed between 1836 and 1867 and since 1968 has housed two Smithsonian museums. The building has been closed for renovation since 2000. The ramps are funded as part of the appropriated renovation program.

Background

In the past year the Commission has reviewed proposals for the redesign of the courtyard and the proposed enclosure of the courtyard with a canopy. This review is ongoing. In addition, the Commission gave concept approval in January 2005 for the reconstruction of a staircase on the F Street (south) façade. The staircase review is also ongoing and will be allied with a study of possible site alterations in the reservation. The construction of the ramps, as an exterior element of the renovation program, is subject to review by the Commission under the Planning Act and to Section 106 review.

Proposal

The northern portion of the reservation was altered when the Smithsonian assumed the building for its use in the 1960s, and again in the 1970s during Metrorail construction. The portico and building façade are original, but the staircase itself is not. The site was altered by the insertion of the loading dock ramp that crosses the site from east-west under the reconstructed staircase. Thus, the fabric of the staircase and plaza at the top of the stairs is not original to the building and dates to the third quarter of the 20th century.

The Smithsonian has proposed the construction of a pair of symmetrical switchback ramps, one on each side of the center portico, to be aligned parallel with the G Street sidewalk and the façade of the building. The accessible ramps will be inserted between the loading dock ramps and the G Street sidewalk. Sections of the wrought iron fence (which is not historic) will be opened adjacent to the stone pedestals flanking the base of the staircase at the sidewalk to create swinging gates to provide access to the ramps. The lower half of the switchback ramps will rise toward the outside corners of the building, turn at landings, and return in the opposite direction to the plaza at the top of the stairs. At the plaza level at the top of the ramps, cuts in the low granite walls will allow direct access to the plaza and entrance. One of the main entrance doors will be modified to be accessible and fitted with power-assist hardware. All visitors will enter the building through the same doors under the portico.

The ramps extend approximately 40 feet in each direction. The slopes of the ramps (each of which contains a mid-slope landing so that there are two runs in each direction) accommodate the change in the site grade (sloping from east to west) so that the railings are as symmetrical in appearance as possible. On the east side, the first two sloped sections are less than 1:20, with the second two runs at a 1:12 slope. On the west side, all four runs of the ramp are at a 1:12 slope. A simple picket railing and top rail 42 inches in height is proposed.

The paving surface of the ramps will be granite, similar to the granite of the staircase and pedestals. The face of the walls of the loading dock ramps will also be faced in granite. The metal handrails and guardrails will be painted to complement the painted metal fence at the sidewalk. The pair of flagpoles on the plaza (not original to the building) will be relocated to the landings of the ramps, in order to open the view of the building's historic portico in the 8th Street vista.

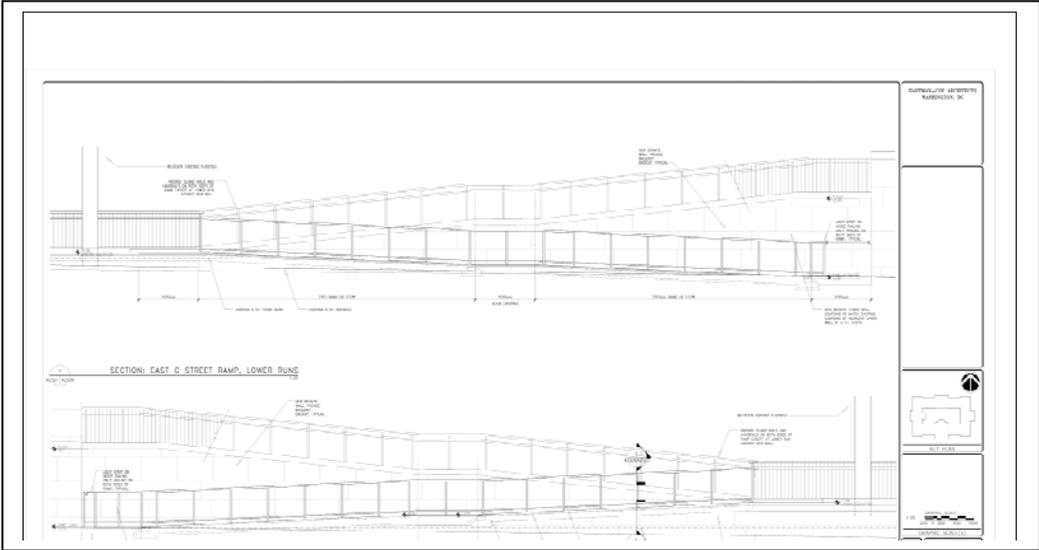
The Smithsonian's horticulturist has contributed to the development of the project and has incorporated a well-considered landscape plan for this portion of the site. The northern edge of the reservation has already suffered a loss of greenscape through the construction of the pair of loading dock ramps. The current submission proposes the installation of new maples against the historic facades (spaced between the pilasters), underplanted with Tamarisk Juniper and Winter Jasmine trained to hang down to screen the rear faces of the loading dock walls. Blue Star Junipers will be planted in front of the accessible ramps, inside the sidewalk fence, to screen and enhance the area closest to pedestrians. All of the proposed plants are appropriate for the era of the building. This is considered an interim planting plan insofar as the anticipated Cultural Landscape Report might suggest other alternatives, although this planting plan may also be an acceptable permanent plan, as well.



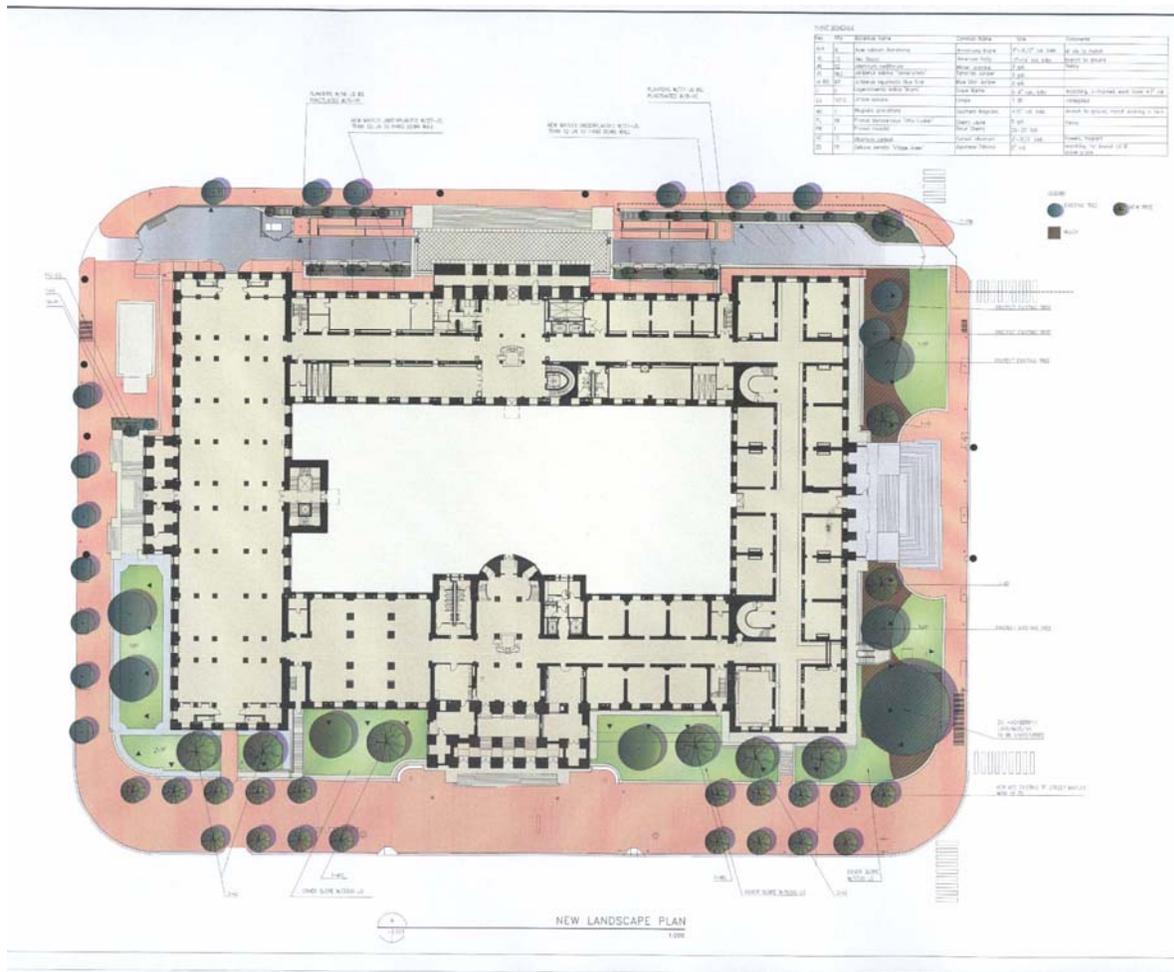
G Street (North) façade of the Patent Office Building



View of loading dock ramp from 7th Street (looking west). The plaza between the building portico and the main staircase from the sidewalk was constructed above the loading dock ramp in the 1960s.



Elevation of ramps



Site plan (north entrance at top) showing relationship of proposed handicap access ramps to the sidewalk, stairs, and east-west loading dock ramp. Site plan also shows proposed landscaping in front of handicap ramps and behind loading dock ramp on both sides.

Development Program

Architect: Hartman-Cox Architects
Schedule: Construction by Winter 2005-6 for museum reopening in July 2006
Cost: Included in the renovation plan for the building, for which \$166 million was appropriated.

PROJECT ANALYSIS

The Executive Director recommends approval of the preliminary and final site and building plans. The ramps will alter the view and massing of the building and create an adverse effect to the National Historic Landmark, but staff concurs with the Smithsonian Institution that it is a

necessary alteration for a public museum. The ramps meet the letter and spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The north elevation is the logical location for the ramps, since the south entrance has been less altered. The elevator at the Gallery Place Metrorail Station is at 7th and F, but another is being considered for 9th and G. It is anticipated that many physically able visitors will also use the ramps, which are near the Metrorail station exit at 9th and G. Other accessible entrance plans and ramp locations and configurations were studied in past iterations of this scheme, including single ramps, ramps without switchbacks, and ramps that began at the outer corners of the site. While a pair of ramps doubles the extent of the alteration, it also creates a symmetrical plan for the north façade of this neoclassical-style building.

The accessible ramps do not touch historic fabric, and are inserted in front of the loading dock ramps. Because of loading dock ramps, which descend below grade underneath the extended portico plaza, the possibility of an at-grade entrance at the sides of the staircase is not possible.

The planting plan is a welcome component of the proposal and will add as much planting material as possible to the reservation, and will partially screen the accessible ramps and service ramps as well as enhance the setting of the building.

CONFORMANCE

Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

The proposed ramps will provide an accessible entrance to the museums and building. They will cause an Adverse Effect to the Patent Office Building, but are designed to be as compatible as possible with the neoclassical symmetry of the building and are faced with fine and compatible building and plant materials.

Relevant policies in the Preservation and Historic Features element include:

5. Protect and enhance the vistas and views, both natural and designed, that are an integral part of the national capital's image. .
9. Sustain exemplary standards of historic property stewardship.
14. Protect the settings of historic properties, including views to and from the sites where significant, as integral parts of the historic character of the property.
19. Ensure that new construction is distinguishable from historic structures but also compatible with the qualities and character of the setting, in accordance with the *Secretary of the Interiors' Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines*.
25. Promote continuity in the historic design framework of the nation's capital by protecting and enhancing the elements, views, and principles of the L'Enfant Plan. Both the federal and the

District of Columbia government should adhere to these principles in any improvements or alterations to the historic framework.

28. Protect the reservations that contain historic landscapes and features from incompatible changes or incursions.

33. Protect the reciprocal views along the rights-of-way, as well as to and from the squares, circles and reservations.

National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA)

NCPC staff had analyzed, in conformance with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the prepared Supplemental Environmental Assessment (EA) completed by the Smithsonian Institution (SI) for planning and construction of Patent Office Building improvements, including the building's interior courtyard and incorporation by reference, the G Street ramps evaluated in the EA of 2003 located north of the structure. Staff completed a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) in October 2004.

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

The construction of the ramps and the associated interim landscape plan is the subject of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) among the Smithsonian Institution, the National Capital Planning Commission, the D.C. State Historic Preservation Officer, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. The Smithsonian determined that the undertaking would have an adverse effect on the Patent Office Building, a National Historic Landmark. The consultation also included the Secretary of the Interior, the Committee of 100 on the Federal City, the D.C. Preservation League, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the Downtown BID. The MOA stipulates that a Cultural Landscape Report for the Reservation be researched and written to provide guidance for decision-makers considering the possible realignment and redesign of the reservation as a whole, including the extent of the lawn and fence and the reconstruction of the south stairs.

CONSULTATION

Coordinating Committee

The project was coordinated by all attending agencies at the March 2005 meeting of the Coordinating Committee.

Commission of Fine Arts

The Commission of Fine Arts approved the two ramps in September 2002.