

# STAFF RECOMMENDATION

NCPC File No. 6479



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**SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION**  
PATENT OFFICE BUILDING  
F STREET STAIR RECONSTRUCTION AND RESERVATION LANDSCAPE  
G, F, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets, NW

Submitted by the Smithsonian Institution

March 30, 2006

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## **Abstract**

The Smithsonian Institution has submitted a revised concept proposal for landscape improvements to Reservation 8, the setting of the Patent Office Building bounded by 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets and F and G Streets, NW. The Smithsonian has researched and completed a Cultural Landscape Report, which has informed the proposed concept design for the reservation landscape. The Cultural Landscape Report documents the history of the grounds and plantings in the reservation and recommends a treatment plan for the landscape and streetscape when it is rehabilitated. The Smithsonian has incorporated most of the treatment recommendations in its concept design. The submission also includes concept plans for the reconstruction of the F Street stair, first reviewed by the Commission as a concept at its January 2005 meeting, as well as the extension of the lawn and fence line southward to its historic location. The reconstruction of the F Street stair was a required mitigation measure in NCPC's environmental action (the October 2004 FONSI) and in the Commission's approval of the courtyard canopy in September 2005. Another required mitigation measure, the restoration and reinstallation of the historic cast iron fountains, was not recommended in the Cultural Landscape Report for installation on the exterior of the building and the Smithsonian has not included them in its landscape concept design. The disposition of the fountains is also described in a related submission from the Smithsonian this month for the Patent Office Building's courtyard landscape. The findings of the Cultural Landscape Report (itself a mitigation measure), the reservation landscape design concept, and the reconstruction of the F Street stair are the subject of continuing Section 106 consultation.

## **Authority**

Approval of revised concept plans pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1) and (d).

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## **Executive Director's Recommendation**

**Comments favorably** on the revised concept design for the rehabilitation of the reservation landscape, which includes the treatment and location of plants and trees, the extension of the south lawn and fence line to their historic position on F Street, the streetscape plan for sidewalk

pavement and light standards, and the reconstruction of the F Street stairs, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 21.00(38.00)42002.

**Concurs** with the Smithsonian that the historic courtyard fountains are in fair to poor condition, that they will not be restored and reinstalled to working order either in the courtyard or in the lawn as Secretary Small committed to doing in June 2005, and that, in partial mitigation for the loss of the historic courtyard, they instead be treated as artifacts and interpreted in a permanent exhibit on the history of the building to be installed in a gallery inside the F Street entrance.

**Notes** that the revised concept design includes an early proposal for a security barrier line and recommends that Commission review of security location and design occur only after the Smithsonian has completed its threat analysis and **requests** that the Smithsonian submit, if necessary, a developed proposal for security design to the Commission with the preliminary site and building plans for the reservation landscape.

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## PROJECT SUMMARY

### Site Description

The Patent Office Building occupies Reservation 8 in the L'Enfant Plan, situated on the 8<sup>th</sup> Street axis between F and G Streets, NW. The courtyard is in the center of the building, which was constructed in the Greek Revival style in four phases over a thirty-year period from the 1830s to the 1860s. It is recognized by historians as one of the most significant Greek Revival-style buildings in the nation.

### Background

The Executive Director's Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) of October 2004 stipulated the reconstruction of the F Street stair in conjunction with a compatible reservation landscape plan. The Commission reviewed a concept for the reconstruction of the F Street stair at its January 2005 meeting. The stair reconstruction has since been studied further, with the aid of additional historic documentation, and has been resubmitted with a reservation landscape plan. During the past six months the Smithsonian Institution has completed an excellent Cultural Landscape Report (CLR), also stipulated in the Commission approval of the canopy, which has informed the development of the landscape plan. The development of the CLR, the reconstruction of the stair, and the development of a compatible reservation landscape plan are also the subject of a July 2005 Memorandum of Agreement executed for the approval of the access ramps for the north (G Street) entrance. The progress of the CLR research and findings, the reservation landscape, and the stair reconstruction have been the subjects of ongoing Section 106 consultation with the access ramp MOA signatories and other parties.

At its September 8, 2005 meeting, the Commission approved the installation of a canopy over the courtyard, conditioned on required mitigation measures to which the Smithsonian agreed. These measures included the reconstruction of a courtyard landscape and the restoration and installation of the two original courtyard fountains, as well as the reconstruction of the F Street staircase and the installation of a landscape and streetscape plan for the Patent Office Building reservation. In its September 8, 2005 action, the Commission also accepted Secretary Small's June 1, 2005 commitment (reiterated in a September 7, 2005 letter from Deputy Secretary Sheila Burke) to reconstruct the historic staircase on the F Street façade and to restore the two original fountains, and understood that SI would use trust funds and donated funds to complete all mitigation measures for which appropriated funds were unavailable.

The Smithsonian is now completing the rehabilitation of the Patent Office Building and the building will reopen to the public in July 2006. The completion of the reservation landscape and the reconstruction of the F Street stair is planned for fall 2008.

The realignment of F Street to its pre-1935 configuration was realized in the late 1990s by the Federal Highways Administration and the D.C. Department of Public Works (now DDOT) pursuant to a mitigation measure stipulated in the Commission's 1995 Memorandum of Agreement for the DC Sports Arena (now the Verizon Center). At the time, the Commission anticipated the possibility of reconstructing the Patent Office Building's F Street stair by reconstructing the north F Street curb line to allow it.

#### Prior Commission Action

The Commission approved a concept design for the F Street stair at its January 2005 meeting. The current submission is a revised concept design that proposes the return of the reservation to its extent and character by moving the fence to its historic location and extending the south lawn. At its September 2005 meeting, the Commission also commented that the Smithsonian "should continue to develop design options with the historic fountains installed both inside and outside the courtyard until the Patent Office Reservation landscape plan is submitted and until the courtyard water features are further developed."

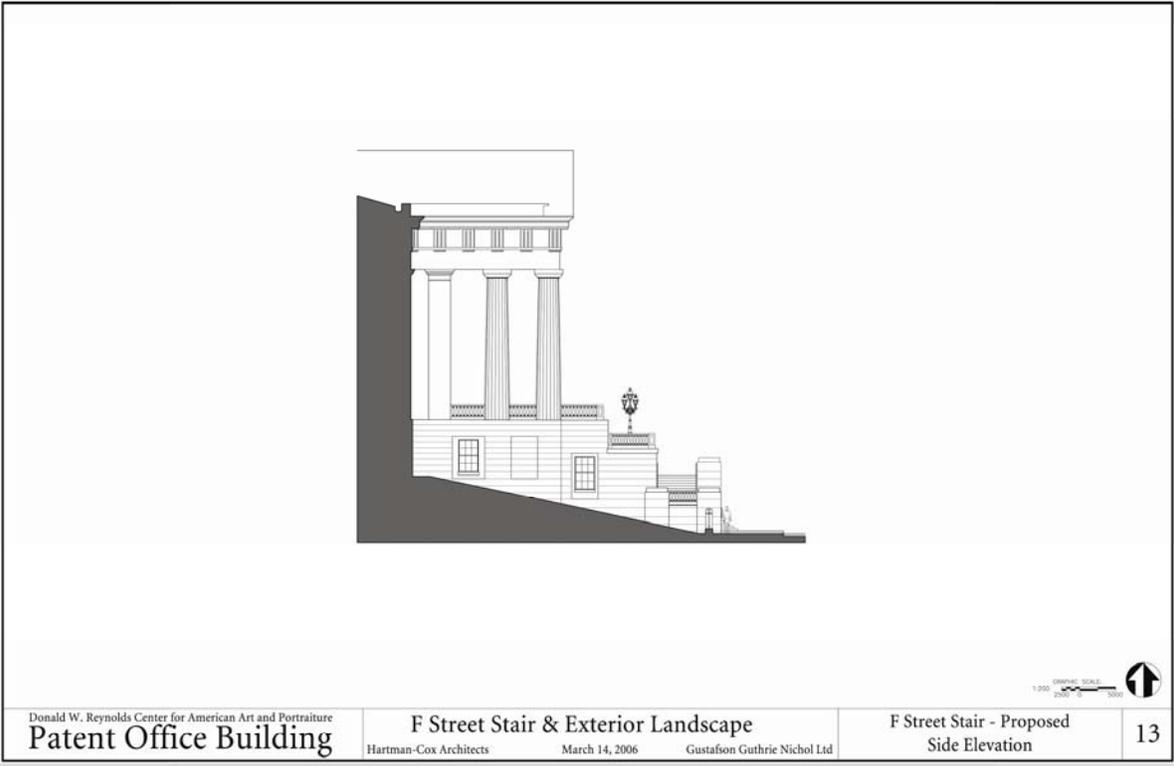
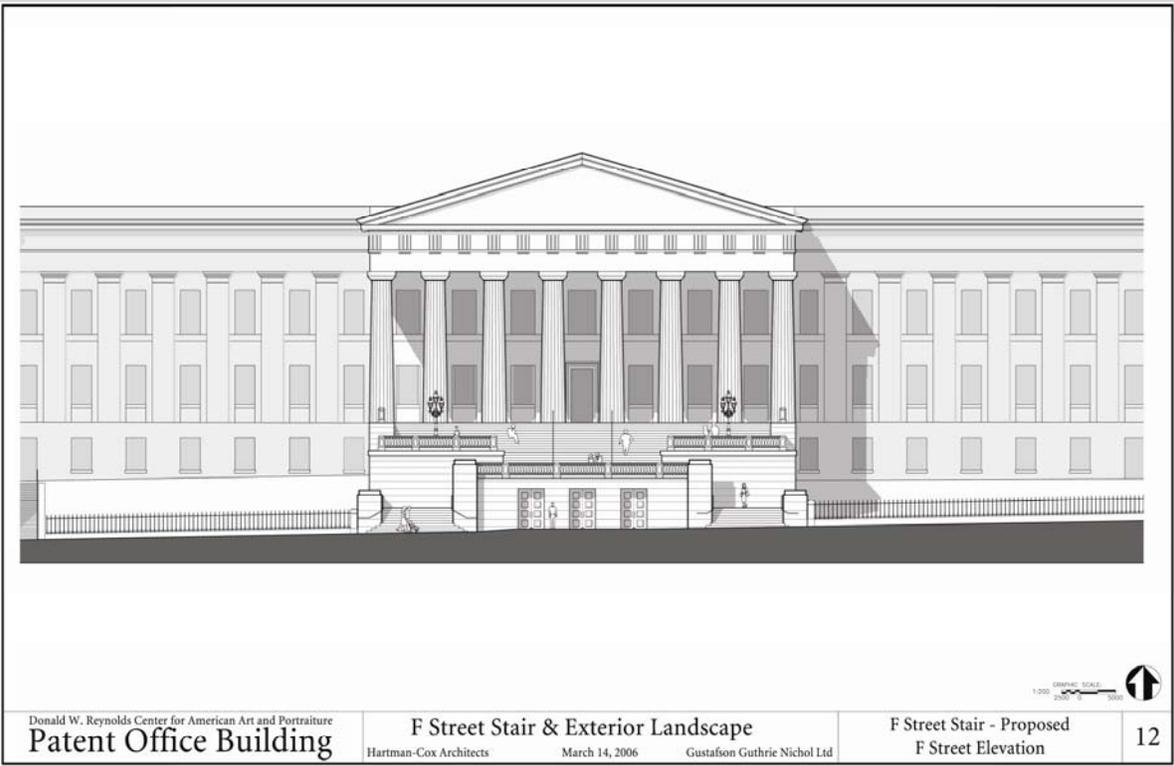
#### Proposal

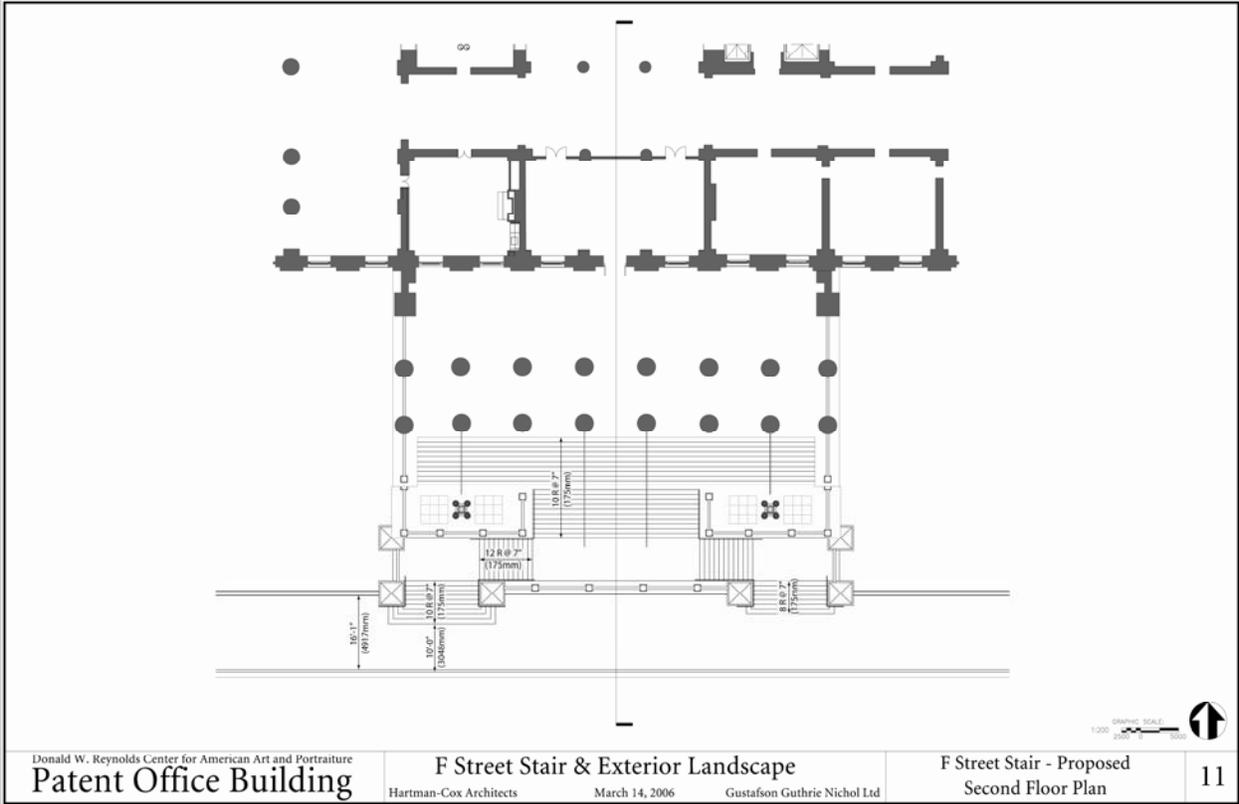
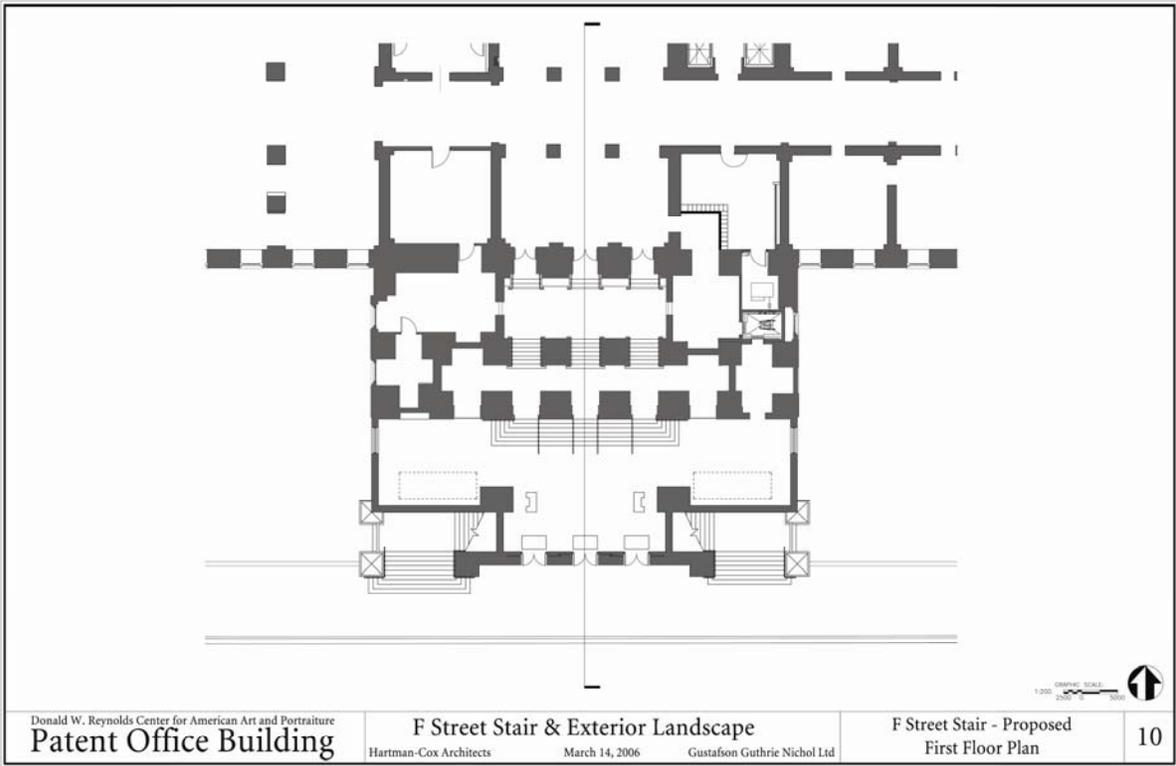
The period of significance for the reconstruction of the F Street stair and the enlargement and character of the reservation landscape is the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century—that is, the period that encompassed the stair reconfiguration that followed the lowering of F Street in the 1870s through the planting of trees and certain alterations to the reservation in the early twentieth century. This is the landscape plan that, in its major components and character, existed from the 1870s until the 1930s, at which time the stair was removed and the fence moved closer to the building when F Street was realigned closer to the south entrance of the building.

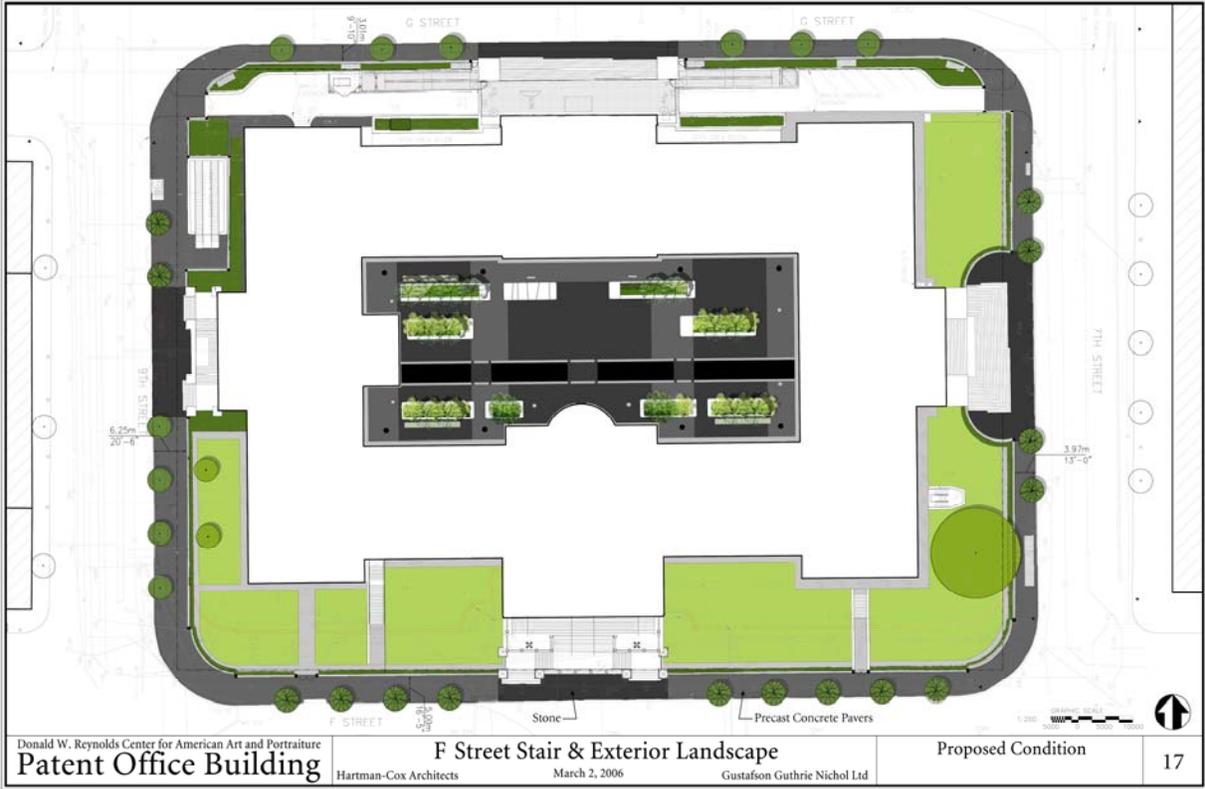
The revised concept design includes the following major elements:

- The reconstruction of the F Street stair to its historic configuration, with the addition of three entrance doors from the sidewalk to the vestibule in order to provide full access to the building as well as to the current interior museum entrance. The stair meets the current building code and yet achieves the same 29% slope of the historic stair. Glass pavers (not used in the original stair) will be installed in the two landings in order to allow natural light into the entrance vestibule below. The two late-nineteenth century light standards will be reconstructed, using a photograph of the period.
- The enlargement of the reservation to its historic configuration by the extension of the south lawn and the relocation of the historic fence to its previous position, thus restoring the extent and character of the reservation on the F Street frontage. The surviving masonry remnants of the parterres in the lawn will be retained. Grass or a ground cover will be planted. Extending the south lawn will provide the opportunity to re-grade it to a slope similar to the one that existed in the historic era. When the stairs were removed in the 1930s and the fence line moved closer to the building, the slope of the lawn was necessarily made steeper. A gentler slope can be restored now that the lawn will be extended.
- The addition of plantings around the Metro escalator and around the loading dock on the north side to augment the nature of the reservation as much as possible.
- The development of a planting plan for the reservation that retains significant trees in the reservation and removes the later magnolias around the existing F Street entrance (which will be reconstructed) to restore open views of the projecting F Street stair.
- The development of a streetscape plan that includes the removal of the 1970s PADC Streets for People brick pavement that remains on the north side of F Street, the installation of Downtown or "London" concrete pavers in the sidewalks and installation of granite pavers at the four porticos of the building, the installation of street trees around the reservation, and the installation of Washington Globe light standards (Twin-Twenties) around the reservation.

The landscape plan does not include the reinstallation of the historic cast iron fountains. Upon review by the project architect and a conservator, the fountains were found to be in fair to poor condition and not suitable for installation on the lawn of the building. The Smithsonian has suggested interpreting them in a permanent exhibit on the history of the Patent Office Building inside the museum. The staff has asked the Smithsonian to provide sufficient information about the disposition of the cast iron fountains and how they will be used and interpreted in the exhibit prior to submitting final site development plans for the courtyard landscape, which is anticipated for Commission review at its July 2006 meeting. At that time the Commission will also review the preliminary site and building plans for the reservation landscape plan.









Photograph of the Patent Office and its reservation taken from the southeast in the 1870s after the F Street stair was modified following the lowering of F Street by approximately 12 feet. The historic fence will be relocated to the position shown in this photo and the south lawn will be extended behind the fence. The revised concept design for the reservation landscape proposes a simple ground treatment of grass or ground cover, with the planting of new street trees but no new trees on the grounds. The F Street stairs will be reconstructed as shown in this photograph, except that the front wall of the stairs will have three doors so that the public can enter from the sidewalk directly to the first level of the museum.

## PROJECT ANALYSIS

The signature achievement of this landscape plan—and the longstanding planning goal of the Commission and the D.C. State Historic Preservation Office and the hope of many in Washington—is the reconstruction of the historic F Street stair, the relocation of the historic fence to its previous alignment in relation to the stair, and the extension of the south lawn toward F Street, behind the new fence line. The reconstruction of the F Street stair will restore an exterior architectural element that has been painfully absent since 1935. The stair and the extension of the lawn and relocation of the fence will make tangible and enhance our understanding of the Patent Office Building and its reservation in the L’Enfant Plan and in the public life of Downtown and our nation’s capital.

The staff commends the Smithsonian Institution for its acceptance of and commitment to these mitigation measures, which will reconstruct the exterior appearance of the Patent Office Building’ south façade and restore its visual prominence in the L’Enfant Plan and in the heart of the historic Downtown. The reconstruction and rehabilitation of the exterior setting of the Patent Office will underscore the visibility and importance of the museums contained within the building and will contribute to the institution’s physical presence in the daily life of the city.

The staff commends Hartman-Cox Architects for its creative and persistent professionalism in pursuing a reconstruction of the F Street stair that meets today’s building code and accessibility requirements and preserves the museums’ entrance from the F Street sidewalk, yet maintains the historic slope and projection of the stairs into the F Street right-of-way. While the reconstructed stair will be the centerpiece of the new reservation plan, it should rightly be seen as a highly significant component of the Smithsonian’s rehabilitation of the interior of the historic Patent Office Building, which has also been directed by Hartman-Cox.

Further, the staff commends the Smithsonian’s development of a model Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) by the firms of Rhodeside and Harwell and Robinson and Associates. The research, analysis, and recommended treatment plan in the CLR (and the associated consultation among the Smithsonian, their consultants, and the agencies and interested parties in the past six months) have informed the development of the proposed landscape plan. The CLR is a gracefully written document that should continue to inform the Smithsonian’s decisions about the reservation. Replete with historic photographs and drawings, and recording the development and alteration of the Patent Office’s site by historic periods, the CLR is a useful history and record of the building and its setting in the L’Enfant Plan.

The concept design for the reservation landscape has been developed by the landscape architecture firm of Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, which participated in the consultation during the development of the CLR. With a few exceptions, noticeably in the retention of certain trees, the proposed landscape plan is similar to the landscape treatment recommended by Rhodeside and Harwell and Robinson and Associates.

The addition of clipped hedges around the Metro escalator and along the loading dock on G Street will add much needed greenscape that will help to convey the original extent of the

reservation on the north side before these subsequent alterations. The staff recommends approval of the proposal for the retention of significant trees in the reservation through their natural, healthy life, after which time they will be removed and not replaced. The plain and simple character of the lawn will be retained either with the planting of grass or ground cover. Masonry remnants of the parterres will be retained *in situ*.

The plan also includes streetscape elements such as sidewalk pavement materials, the installation of light standards, and the planting of street trees. The uniform streetscape treatment on all four sides of the reservation (which is not reflected in the current DDOT streetscape manual) has been a guiding principle in the development of the landscape plan.

The landscape plan does not include the reinstallation of the historic cast iron fountains. Upon review by the project architect and a conservator, the fountains were found to be in fair to poor condition and not suitable for installation on the lawn of the building. The staff concurs with this assessment. The Smithsonian has suggested interpreting them in a permanent exhibit inside the museum on the history of the Patent Office Building. The staff has requested that the Smithsonian provide sufficient information about the disposition of the cast iron fountains and how they will be used and interpreted in the exhibit prior to submitting final site development plans for the courtyard landscape (anticipated for the Commission's July 2006 meeting).

The Smithsonian has submitted an early proposal for a perimeter security location and treatment. The staff does not recommend consideration of this early idea at this time, absent the completion of a threat assessment and, if necessary, the development of security design in response to that assessment. The staff has recommended that the Smithsonian complete the assessment and, if necessary, develop a proposal prior to submitting preliminary site and building plans for the reservation landscape.

## CONFORMANCE

### Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

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 Policy Act

NCPC staff has analyzed, in conformance with the requirements of NEPA, the current submission for adherence to the evaluation of the previously prepared Supplemental Environmental Assessment (EA) submitted by the Smithsonian Institution for planning and construction of improvements at the POB.

Staff prepared a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) on October 8, 2004 based on adoption of that EA with mitigation requirements. The 2004 Supplemental EA addressed long-term effects from the implementation of a proposed courtyard roof as it related to historic and visual resources, including the character of the exterior setting of the Patent Office Building in Reservation 8 and the importance of the Patent Office in the L'Enfant Plan and its vistas and viewsheds.

The Executive Director's Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) of October 2004 stipulated the reconstruction of the F Street stair in conjunction with a compatible reservation landscape plan. The Commission reviewed a concept for the reconstruction of the F Street staircase at its January 2005 meeting. The stair reconstruction has since been studied further, with the aid of further historic documentation, and has been resubmitted with the reservation landscape plan.

The NCPC staff's current independent review finds that the EA conclusions and FONSI mitigation requirements remain valid and represent an acceptable analysis of the potential environmental impacts of the submitted plans, and effectively respond to the mitigation sought by the Commission in its approval of the courtyard canopy in 2005.

#### National Historic Preservation Act

In the past six months the Smithsonian Institution has researched and completed a Cultural Landscape Report (CLR), also stipulated in the Commission approval of the canopy, which has informed the development of the landscape plan. The development of the CLR, the reconstruction of the historic F Street stair, and the development of a compatible reservation landscape plan to restore the extent and character of the reservation are the subject of a July 2005 Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The MOA was executed for the construction of the access ramps on the north

(G Street) façade of the Patent Office Building, which received preliminary final site and building plan approval by the Commission at its August 2005 meeting. As a result of the termination of Section 106 consultation for the courtyard enclosure and canopy, mitigation measures were developed through the Executive Director's October 2004 Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), through the July 2005 Section 106 MOA for the G Street access ramps, as well as through the action of the Commission at its September 2005 meeting approving the courtyard enclosure and canopy.

The progress of the CLR research and findings, the development of the reservation landscape plan, and the progress of the stair reconstruction plans have been the subjects of ongoing Section 106 consultation with the signatories and interested parties. Consultation will continue during further development of the revised concept proposal.

## CONSULTATION

### Coordinating Committee

The revised concept design for the F Street stair reconstruction and the reservation landscape plan were presented to the Coordinating Committee at its meeting of March 15, 2006 and was coordinated by all agencies present. The participating agencies were NCPC; the District of Columbia Office of Planning; the Department of Housing and Community Development; the Fire Department; the District Department of Transportation; the General Services Administration and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

### Commission of Fine Arts

At its meeting of March 16, 2006 and its letter of March 24, 2006, the Commission of Fine Arts reviewed and approved the revised concept for the exterior landscape and reconstruction of the F Street stair, expressing concern about the design of additional perimeter security features. The March 24, 2006 letter is attached.

During the meeting, the subject of a possible metal gate across the upper portion of the south stair was raised. The commissioners commented in response that they would prefer unimpeded public access to the entire staircase and to the building through the portico at the top of the stairs, but they commented favorably on the use of a well-designed metal gate separating the upper portion of the stairs (as preferable to an ad hoc solution). The Smithsonian currently uses gates across the east and west portico stairs to indicate that they are not entrances.

The Smithsonian has not submitted a proposal for such a gate across the F Street stairs to either the Commission of Fine Arts or to the National Capital Planning Commission. NCPC staff considers the possible use of a gate across the stairs to be a matter for discussion at the next stage of Commission review.