

# STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Nancy Witherell

NCPC File No. 6479

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**PATENT OFFICE BUILDING  
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
F STREET STAIR RECONSTRUCTION, LANDSCAPE PLAN, SECURITY, AND SIGNS  
G, F, 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets, NW  
Washington, D.C.**

Submitted by the Smithsonian Institution

October 25, 2007

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## **Abstract**

The Smithsonian Institution has submitted preliminary and final site and building plans for the Patent Office Building's reservation landscape, F Street Stair reconstruction, security elements, and signs. The building plans are very similar to the plans reviewed by the Commission as a revised concept design at the April 2007 meeting, but the security barriers have been reduced substantially. The Smithsonian has eliminated the proposed sidewalk bollards and the installation of cables to the cast iron fence.

## **Commission Action Requested by Applicant**

Approval of the preliminary and final site and building plans pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1) and (d)

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## **Executive Director's Recommendation**

The Commission, relative to NCPC Map File No. 21.00(38.40)42179:

**Commends** the Smithsonian Institution for enhancing the Patent Office Building's façade and reservation, and for reconsidering its security requirements and removing proposed barriers from public space.

## **Approves:**

- The rehabilitation of the reservation landscape plan.

- The reconstruction of the F Street Stair.
- The security elements, consisting of a raised granite wall supporting the historic cast iron fence around the reservation, and the installation of two guard booths and six retractable bollards at the entrances to the service drive.
- The installation of a segment of one of the courtyard cast iron fountains and an urn in the exhibit on the building's construction and architectural fabric.

**Disapproves:**

- The fifteen installed and proposed information and program signs for the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery, on the sidewalks and attached to the cast iron fence.
- The installed building identification lettering on the north and south entrances of the building as being overscaled and misplaced on the building.

**Requires** that the Smithsonian consult through the Section 106 process on the installed and proposed signs and lettering and formally submit the proposal to the Commission, as requested at the April 2007 meeting.

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**PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Site

The Patent Office Building, housing the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture, occupies Reservation 8 in the L'Enfant Plan. The reservation is bounded by 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets, and by F and G Streets, NW. The Patent Office Building, a National Historic Landmark, was built in the Greek Revival style during the middle third of the nineteenth century. Reservation 8 is a prominent reservation in the L'Enfant Plan and a focal point for activities and pedestrian traffic in the heart of Downtown.

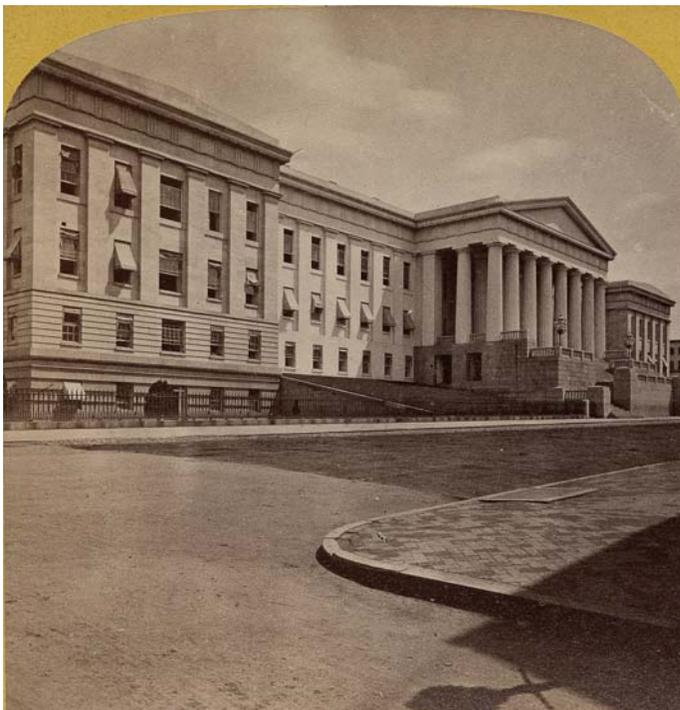
Background

The Commission has reviewed and commented favorably on the Smithsonian's proposal for reconstructing the F Street staircase at four previous meetings, most recently in April 2007. The Commission first reviewed the F Street stair reconstruction at its January 2005 meeting, when it was accepted as partial mitigation for the loss of the fabric of the courtyard and for the construction of the roof over the courtyard through the reconstructed appearance of the F Street portico and facade from key L'Enfant right-of-way views.

Similarly, the Commission reviewed and accepted as mitigation the proposed landscape reconstruction. The landscape rehabilitation was designed following the Smithsonian's completion of a Cultural Landscape Report for the reservation. The landscape plan

recommended moving the fence line southward on F Street to its earlier alignment so that the south lawn of the reservation could be enlarged to its pre-1936 dimensions. (In 1936, F Street was moved northward and the Patent Office lawn was narrowed, and the fence and granite wall was also moved northward to accommodate the realigned street and sidewalk. The monumental F Street stair was removed because there was no longer enough distance for the stair run. In the late 1990s, F Street was reconstructed in its earlier alignment with the hope that in the future the staircase could be reconstructed, the south lawn expanded, and the cast iron fence reinstalled in its pre-1936 location.) These improvements have been developed and reviewed by the Commission over the past two years.

Most of the reservation is surrounded by the original cast iron fence, which dates to as early as 1859, mounted on a low granite base approximately 8 inches in height. The fence and wall are contributing historic elements of the landscape because they were constructed during the historic period of significance: 1836-1880. Some sections of the iron fence are replications where replacements were necessary and the location of the fence and granite base was moved northward of the original F Street location when F Street was realigned in 1936. The earlier fence location will be restored as part of the landscape rehabilitation.



This photo of the F Street (south) façade of the Patent Office Building (taken before 1874) shows the monumental stair before it was removed in 1936. The stair will be reconstructed to virtually identical dimensions. The Smithsonian will return the fence line (and extend the south lawn) to the location shown in the photo. In order to provide a perimeter vehicle barrier, the Smithsonian proposes raising the granite curb 18 inches from approximately 8 inches in height (similar to that shown in the photo) to a retaining wall of approximately 26 inches in height. The Smithsonian proposes a precast concrete wall topped by the historic granite curb.

### Description

*The building's F Street stair, removed in 1936, will be reconstructed* according to a 1935 Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) measured drawing documenting the stair before it was removed and historic photographs. Variations from the original staircase include the presence of entrance doors on the façade (similar to the entrance doors in use since the 1930s),

the use of glass on the stair landing to provide natural light to the entrance, and slight dimensional adjustments to the steps and railings to meet life safety code requirements. The stair light globes and standards will also be reconstructed. Wrought iron gates will be used at the portal entrances to retain their open character. The interior entrance of the staircase will accommodate the grade change necessary to be a fully accessible entrance. All visitors will enter the building through the same doors.

*The extent and character of Reservation 8 will be rehabilitated to restore its original dimension and its sloping grass lawn to the extent feasible, following the recommendations of the Cultural Landscape Report prepared by the Smithsonian at the Commission's request in 2005.*

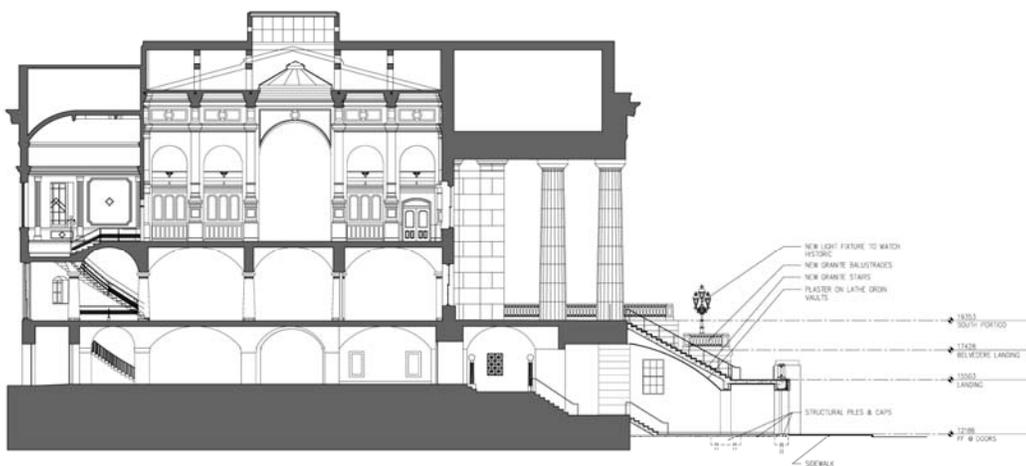
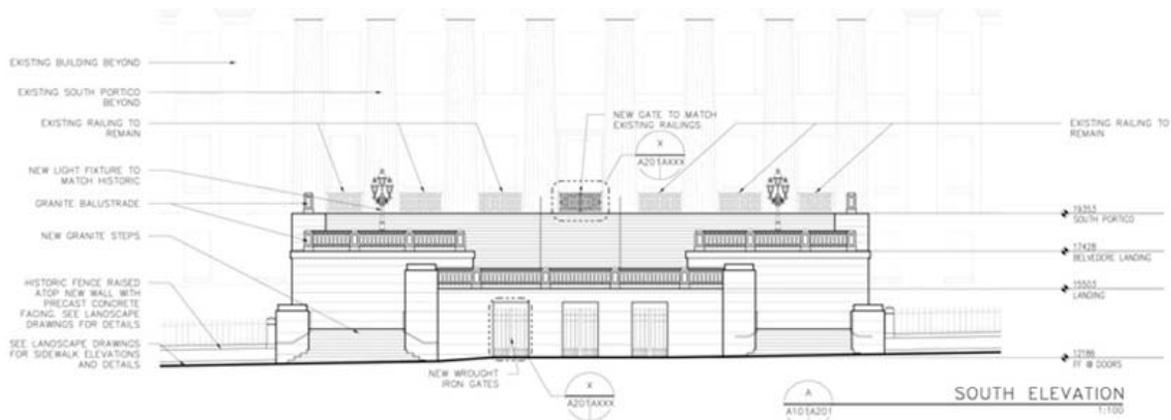
*The museums' revised security plan consists of raising the granite curb around the reservation from the current 8 inches (with some variation in height) to a uniform 26 inches. The security plan no longer includes bollards on the sidewalk around the building or on the stairs. The total height of the 26-inch wall will be created by placing the historic granite curb on top of a concrete wall faced with precast concrete. The cast iron fence will be reinstalled on top of the granite curb, for a total fence height of 6'8". No cable will be installed on the fence. Fence sections will be fabricated to match the historic fence where necessary. Two guard booths, faced with granite, will be constructed at the northeast (9'11" x 6'11") and northwest (15'5" x 8'8") corners of the reservation, integrated into the walls and fence at the entrances to the service drive. The booths will be manned. The booths are similar to the guard booths approved by the Commission for the service drives of the Smithsonian museums on the National Mall. Six retractable bollards will be installed at the ends of the service drive, behind the gates.*

The Smithsonian has submitted plans and information about the small, *permanent exhibit on the architectural and construction history of the building*. The exhibit room is near the F Street entrance to the building and was related to the Commission's approval of the courtyard canopy. A portion of one of the cast iron fountains from the courtyard will be displayed in the exhibit.

*The Smithsonian's view is that their sidewalk signs and lettering on the building are not subject to review by the Commission, nor by the District Department of Transportation. The Smithsonian has provided--for information purposes only, following the Commission's request for submission and review in April 2007--information about 1) 15 information and program signs, some of which have already been installed in the sidewalk or attached to the iron fence at the northeast and northwest corners of the reservation; 2) building identification lettering attached to the north and south faces of the building before the reopening of the museums in June 2006; and, 3) the proposed building identification lettering for the building face of the F Street staircase when it is reconstructed.*

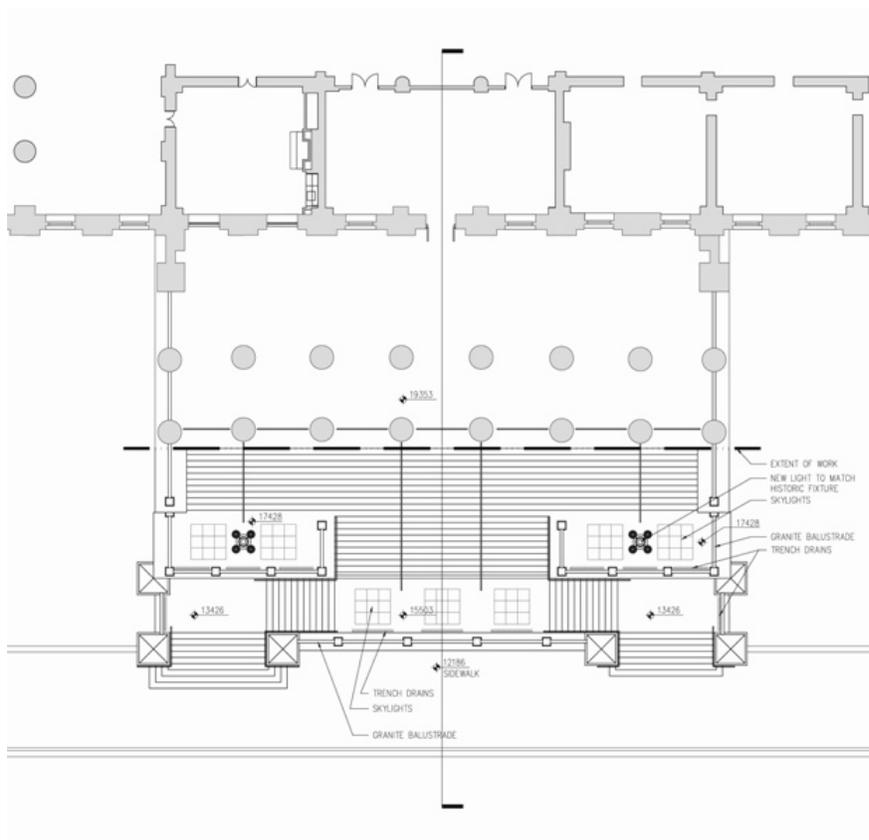
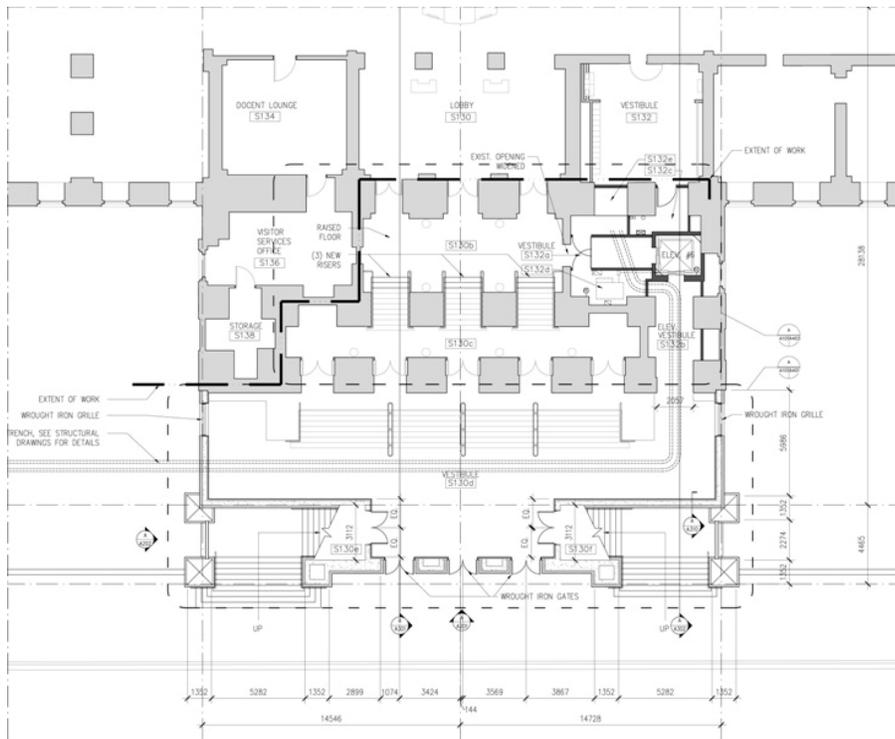
These project elements are illustrated and described further below.

*F Street Stair Reconstruction*



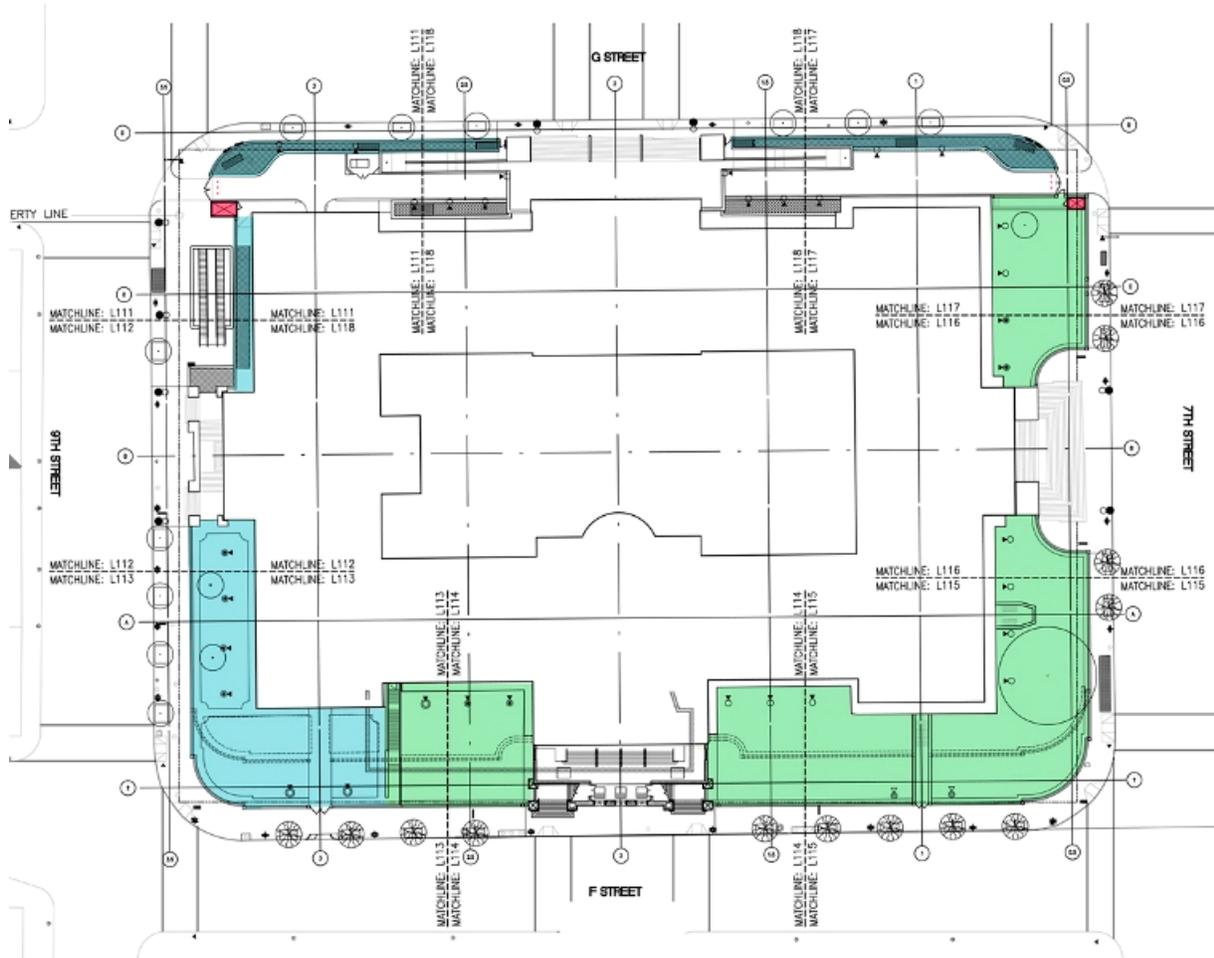
GRAPHIC SCALE  
1:200  
0 1000 2000

Elevation and section showing the proposed reconstruction of the monumental stair on F Street, NW. The reconstruction, unlike the original, will have three entrance portals with wrought iron gates at the sidewalk for an accessible, at-grade entrance.



First and Second Floor Plans for the F Street stair reconstruction

*Rehabilitation of the extent and character of Reservation*



The preliminary and final landscape plan was previously reviewed by the Commission at the April 2006 and April 2007 meetings. In addition to changes to the lawn and fence line, the sidewalks will be paved with concrete pavers, street trees planted, and light standards installed. In addition, the sidewalk will receive special pavers at the four porticos, of the same dark gray granite used for the interior courtyard. These proposed alterations have been reviewed by the District Department of Transportation. The elements deliberately do not conform with DDOT's streetscape manual with respect to the selection of some materials and tree species, since the manual proposes different elements for the four sides of the reservation, and the intent of the current undertaking is to unify the treatment of historic Reservation 8.

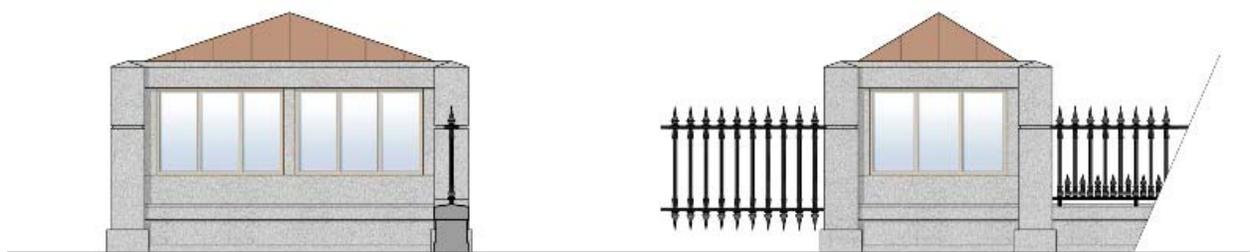
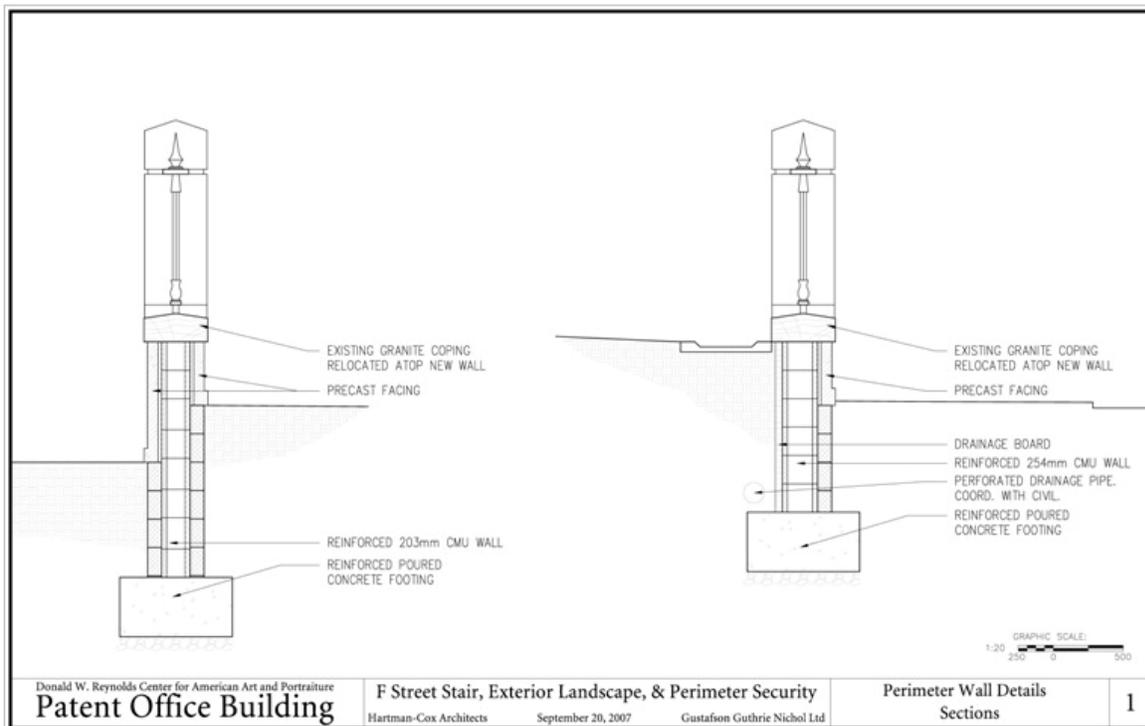
*Security Assessment and Site Elements*

The Smithsonian has reviewed and revised the previous risk assessment for the building, taking into account the physical characteristics of the building and site, the adjacent streets and building uses, the nature of the resources and public use inside, and the type of target a cultural institution might present. It has further reviewed these factors, among other factors, in relation to the Institution’s high design standards and the impact on the Smithsonian’s mission and the public right-of-way and has sought an improved balance between the security level and the character of the building and site, including pedestrian use of the public sidewalk.



Rendering showing the historic cast iron fence on the *raised wall* (faced in precast concrete) with the historic granite curb as a cap. This view is from 7<sup>th</sup> Street, NW. Below, a photo showing the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and G Streets, NW. The fence already sits on a raised wall about 20 inches in height at the north side of the building at the service drive.





Six retractable bollards and two manned guard booths, clad in granite with standing seam red copper roofs, will be constructed to control entry into the service drive from 9<sup>th</sup> Street and 7<sup>th</sup> Street. (Three bollards and a guard booth will be constructed at each end.) The proposal is similar to the guard booths at the service drives for the Smithsonian museums on the National Mall, which are placed at the service drives so that deliveries can be checked in and vehicles approaching the building monitored.



It has been the Commission’s practice under the Planning Act to review plans, including signs, for federal public buildings and the provision for open space in and around federal public buildings in the District of Columbia.

Fifteen such signs, existing and proposed, are planned, including pairs on the sidewalks at each of the four staircases and four to be attached to the fence on the north side of the building. The signs already installed include two vertical Smithsonian information signs—at the southeast corner, and at the top of the Gallery Place Metro escalator on 9<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, and two program signs in the 9<sup>th</sup> Street sidewalk. The signs are the same style and design as those at and around Smithsonian museums on the National Mall. (There is one vertical sign inside the sidewalk at the Massachusetts Avenue, NE entrance of the Postal Museum.) They are shown in the photos on page 11.

In addition, signs were recently installed on the fence on the north side of the building.

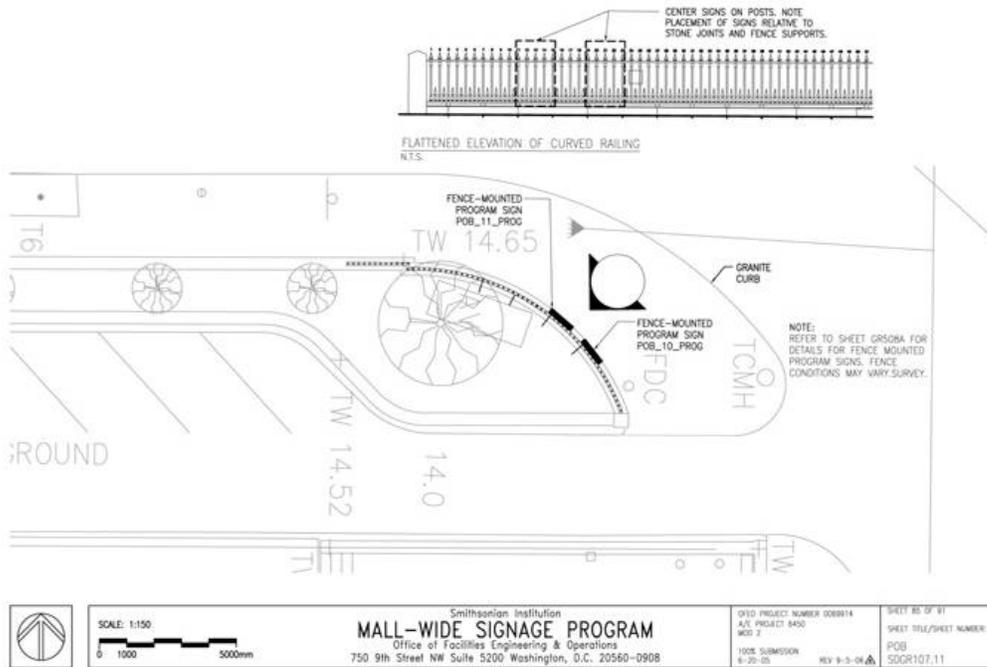
In addition, building identification lettering was attached on the north and south facades of the building when the museums were reopened in June 2006.



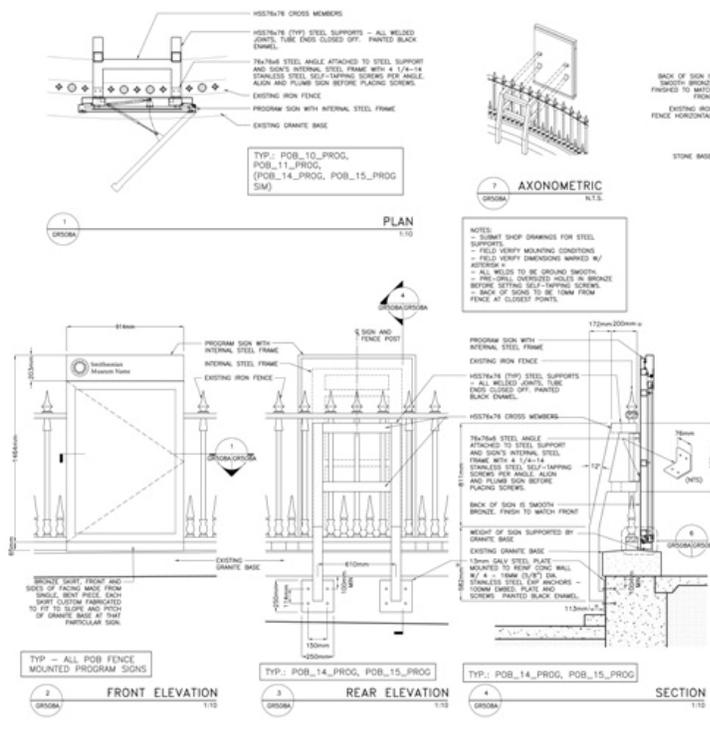
3 Sign Type Comparison



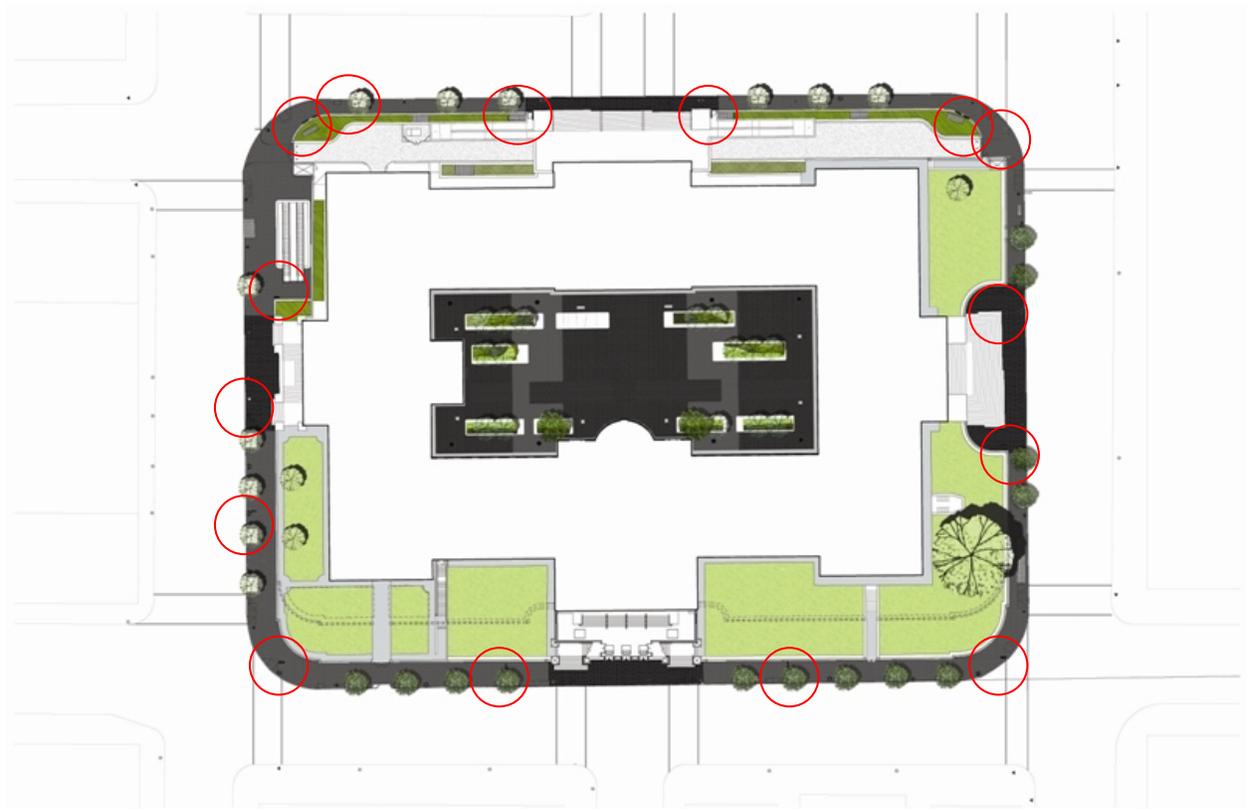
Information and program signs installed on the sidewalk.



Above and below: The Smithsonian has begun to install four program signs for installation on the fence at the northeast and northwest corners. The signs are attached by steel supports between the fence pickets that are attached to the wall below.



Below, the fifteen locations for vertical information and program signs (plans and photographs shown on previous pages)





Photographs of the (at top) F Street (south) and (at bottom) G Street (north) entrance elevations, showing building lettering that was installed before the museums reopened in June 2005.





Above, a photo rendering of the F Street (south) entrance to the building, showing the stairs after they will be reconstructed and illustrating the Smithsonian’s revised lettering plan for the south elevation. The letters on the south elevation will be 2 inches less in height (from 11 to 9 inches) from their current dimension, with a resulting reduction in the length of the longest line from 64 feet to 38 feet long. The proposed reduction is due to the narrower stone courses in the new stair façade.

The Smithsonian plans no change to the lettering on the G Street entrance (57 feet long), since no further architectural alterations are anticipated on the north façade.

### Development Program

The Smithsonian plans to seek federal funds for the landscape rehabilitation, the construction of the retaining wall for the fence, and the security elements at the service drive for Fiscal Year 2013. The Smithsonian will use private funds for the F Street stair reconstruction.

## PROJECT ANALYSIS

*The staff commends the Smithsonian Institution, which has approached its perimeter security design for the Patent Office Building with sensitivity and flexibility, recognized the significance of the building and its prominence in the public realm of downtown Washington, sought a balance between physical and operational security, and instituted high standards for design and the expression of the institution's mission.*

The staff again commends the Smithsonian for the proposed reconstruction of the F Street stair and the rehabilitation of the reservation landscape. The rehabilitation includes street trees, new sidewalk paving, and light standards in the surrounding sidewalks, based on findings and treatment recommendations of the Cultural Landscape Report and previous comments by the Commission and others. The exterior rehabilitation will enhance the Patent Office Building's significant place in the plan of Washington and its engagement with its neighboring buildings, and the security elements are acceptable in the context of the site.

*The staff recommends that the Commission approve the preliminary and final site and building plans for the reconstructed F Street entrance and the reservation rehabilitation, including the security elements: the raised granite wall, the two guardbooths, and the six retractable bollards in the service drive.*

The Commission notes and approves the completion of a small, permanent exhibit on the history of the building's architecture and ornamentation, including the installation of a curved segment and urn of one of the two original cast iron fountains from the courtyard.

### *Signs and Building lettering*

The Smithsonian has forwarded, for information purposes, its sign package (for fifteen information and program signs around the reservation sidewalks) and the lettering on the north and south elevations. In addition, the proposed lettering for the reconstructed F Street entrance was submitted to provide information. The Smithsonian's view is that the Commission does not have review authority for the signs or lettering.

The Commission requested in its April 2007 action that the Smithsonian submit the signs and lettering for Commission review. The letters were installed on the building prior to the June 2006 reopening of the museum, and the Commission staff subsequently informed the Smithsonian that the lettering was subject to the Commission's review. It has been the Commission's practice to approve signs on and around public federal buildings. Section 106 review of Smithsonian projects by the DC SHPO and others occurs as a result of the Commission's review authority under the Planning Act.

The staff informed the Smithsonian staff that it considered the letters overscaled and that the placement of the letters above the entrance doors was incompatible with the architectural character and style of the building. Monumental historic public buildings in Washington

typically eschew such significant building identification above their entrance doors, in favor of lettering or signs lower on the walls (or in the lawn adjacent to entrances).

The Commission of Fine Arts has commented twice on the lettering, at its February and October 2007 meetings. CFA commented that it found the lettering too large in size and the amount of lettering too much.

The DC SHPO informed the Smithsonian in staff-level consultation meetings in 2006 that the lettering was oversized and shouldn't be placed above the entrance portals. The Smithsonian has not initiated consultation with the D.C. State Historic Preservation Office (DC SHPO), as requested by the DC SHPO.

Smithsonian staff has also informed staff that it is SI's view that the sidewalk signs are not subject to review by the District of Columbia government.

Further, the Commission established a policy in 1988 to guide museums and other cultural facilities that "donor/sponsor contributions that are to be located in public buildings in the National Capital shall not be visibly acknowledged on the exterior walls of the building itself or on its grounds."

*None of these ongoing matters is resolved at this time, but the staff and the Smithsonian have agreed to try to resolve them over the next two months.*

Regarding the fifteen information and program signs: the staff finds that the signs provide information about the museums, the current exhibits and programs, and wayfinding information. They help to animate the sidewalk around the reservation and provide color and interest. *Even given the size of the building and reservation, however, staff finds the number of signs proposed to be too many for the reservation and the building, especially given the future addition of street trees and light standards in the sidewalks.*

The staff does not object to the exhibit and identification banners hung by the museums, but notes that, in addition to the fifteen installed and proposed signs, eight banners are regularly hung at the entrances, as shown in the photographs on page 15.

The Commission is reminded that it had a similar reaction to the Smithsonian's initial presentation of information and program signs for the museums on the National Mall (at the Commission's February 2002 meeting), and subsequently for the Renwick Museum on Pennsylvania Avenue, and at the Postal Museum. In all instances, the Smithsonian responded to the Commission's concern with the number of signs by scaling back its sign program and installing about one-third fewer signs than originally proposed.

*The staff recommends that the Smithsonian consult with the Commission staff and the other review agencies, including the DC SHPO, to seek agreement on the most compatible and appropriate signage design for the building and the sidewalks around the reservation, and then submit it to the Commission for review and approval.*

## CONFORMANCE

### Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

The staff has determined that policies in the *Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital: Federal Elements* apply, in particular the following policies in the Preservation and Historic Features Element. The preliminary and final site and building plans are consistent with the policies in regard to the reconstruction of the F Street stair and the rehabilitation of the reservation landscape, including the raised retaining wall.

Express the dignity befitting the image of the federal government in the national capital. Federal development should adhere to the high aesthetic standards already established by the planning and design legacy of the nation's capital. This legacy encompasses both the old and the new—the capital's rich architectural heritage, continually augmented by the design contributions of each generation. (National Capital Image: #1)

Protect the settings of historic properties, including views to and from the sites where significant, and integral parts of the historic character of the property. (Stewardship of Historic Properties: #6)

### National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

NCPC reviews this preliminary and final design for approval. NCPC has approval authority over this project and therefore an obligation to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

NCPC previously had reviewed and adopted, in accordance with established Commission procedures, an Environmental Assessment developed by the applicant with NCPC's input, and for which the Executive Director made a Finding of No Significant Impact in October 2004 for the project. The EA included design elements now submitted for preliminary and final review. The Finding was posted on NCPC's website and was available to the public for 30 days. It was based on the EA and Supplemental EA, dated February 2004, August 2004, and the SI supplemental data of October 1, 2004, along with the Commission staff's assessment of visual and historic impacts. The Finding of No Significant Impact stated that reconstruction of the F Street stairs was required to mitigate the moderate to major visual impact of the courtyard enclosure on the historic building and the enclosure's impact on the L'Enfant Plan. Landscape modifications were included in the Environmental Assessment along with exterior sidewalk modifications and were found to have minor effects. The staff has reviewed the previous environmental documents and Finding and verified the factors reviewed and the results of the October 2004 determination. The physical design effects considered by the Finding have been accounted for within the current project submission. Consequently, the recommendation in this EDR is informed by the earlier NEPA review process and the Finding's conclusions remain applicable.

## National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

The Smithsonian, a federal agency for purposes of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, has served as lead agency for the Section 106 review and consultation. The F Street stair reconstruction and the reservation landscape rehabilitation and streetscape improvements are part of the undertaking covered under a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that included the access ramps constructed on the north side of the building. This MOA was signed by the DC SHPO and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

Further, the Smithsonian recently received the concurrence of the DC SHPO that the now-revised and lesser security alterations to the reservation would not be an adverse effect, given previous alterations to the location and significant portions of the wall and the guard booths' modest size and integration into the adjacent wall and fence. As with the other Smithsonian Museum guard booths at service drive entrances, they are designed to be compatible in material and design with the architectural style of the specific museum. The guard booths and retractable bollards were also found to have no adverse effect on the Patent Office Building and reservation.

The Smithsonian has approached a perimeter security design with sensitivity and flexibility. Its staff and architectural team have consulted repeatedly during the past year and a half with Commission staff, the staffs of the D.C. State Historic Preservation Office and the Commission of Fine Arts, and representatives of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the D.C. Preservation League, and the Committee of 100 on the Federal City.

Staff notes that proposed security barriers in historic settings seek to balance the significance and integrity of historic fabric and elements with the significance and integrity of the historic landscape and setting.

The installed and proposed signs and building lettering *have not* been the subject of Section 106 consultation, although concerns about them have been expressed in meetings among the review agencies and consulting parties. The DC SHPO informed the Smithsonian in consultation meetings in 2006 that it is his view that the signs are subject to Section 106 review and that consultation should be initiated.

## CONSULTATION

### Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee re-coordinated this project at its October 10, 2007 meeting. The participating agencies were: NCPC, the General Services Administration, the District of Columbia Office of Planning, and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

### Commission of Fine Arts

The letter from the Commission of Fine Arts' October 18, 2007 meeting will be distributed to the Commission after it is available.