

STAFF RECOMMENDATION



J. Hirsch
NCPC File No. 7318

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY CALDER SCULPTURE RELOCATION AND REHABILITATION

Constitution Avenue between 12th and 14th Streets, NW
Washington, DC

Submitted by the Smithsonian Institution

November 22, 2011

Abstract

The Smithsonian Institution has submitted preliminary and final site development plans for the relocation and rehabilitation of the Calder sculpture “Gwenfritz” located on the grounds of the National Museum of American History. The Calder sculpture will be relocated to its original location on the west side of the museum and the site-specific reflecting pool above which the sculpture was situated will be reconstructed. In addition, modifications to the plaza on the west side of the museum will include landscaping, new lighting, and improvements to make the reflecting pool level accessible to the disabled.

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

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

Executive Director’s Recommendation

The Commission:

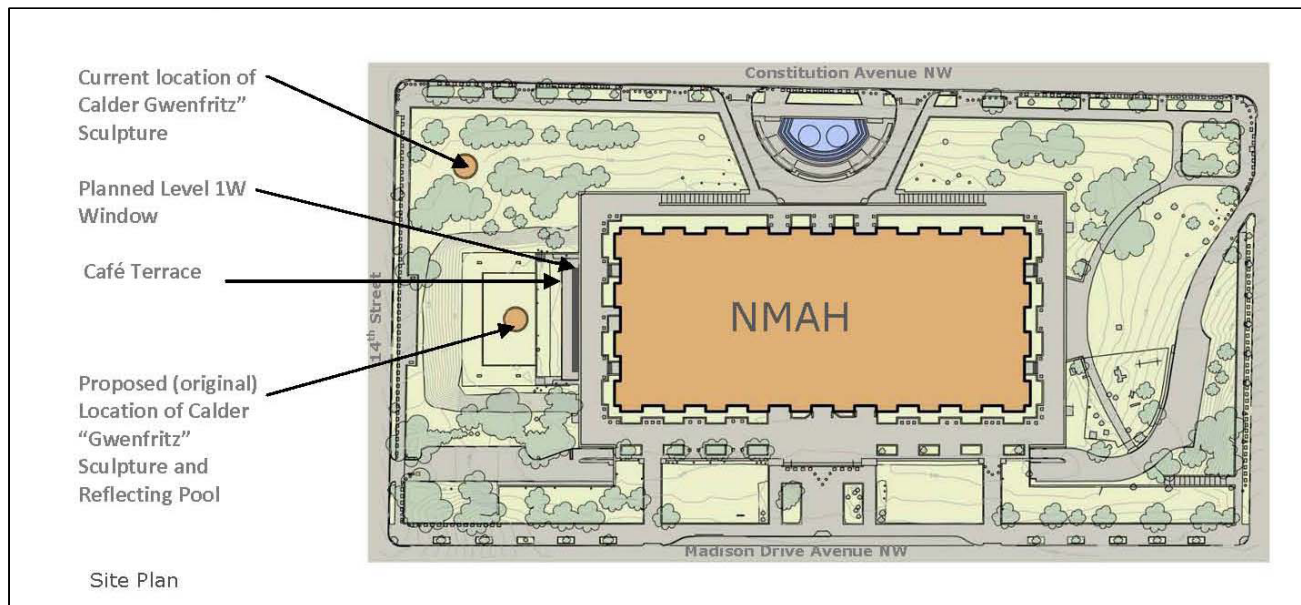
Approves the preliminary and final site development plans for the relocation and rehabilitation of the Calder sculpture, “Gwenfritz,” on the grounds of the National Museum of American History located on Constitution Avenue between 12th and 14th Streets, NW, in Washington, DC, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 1.41(38.00)43471.

* * *

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Site

The Smithsonian Institution's (Smithsonian) National Museum of American History (NMAH) is located on the National Mall between Constitution Avenue, NW and Madison Drive, NW and between 12th and 14th Streets, NW. The proposed modifications are on the west side of the site which faces 14th Street, NW, the Washington Monument Grounds, and the future National Museum of African American History and Culture. The museum, designed by Walker Cain of the New York firm McKim, Mead, and White, opened to the public in 1964.



National Museum of American History, Site Plan for the relocation of the Calder sculpture "Gwenfritz"

Background

In July 2011, the Commission approved the west façade modernization project for the NMAH. This project included a new window in the west façade of NMAH along level 1 and alterations to the large ribbon window centered on the west façade and adjacent to the terrace on level 2. The west façade modification is a component of Phase III of the Smithsonian's Public Space Renewal Project (PSRP). The PSRP is a multi-year, multi-phase revitalization of the NMAH that began in 2003. Phase I included renovations of the lobby as well as corridor and restroom areas of the 3rd floor east. Phase II included the renovation of three public floors comprising approximately 120,000 square feet. Renovations included ADA improvements and modernization of the museum's infrastructure. Phase III is currently underway and includes the renovation of 119,000 square feet in the west wing and establishes three major public spaces: the Public Plaza and Education Center, the Civic Plaza, and the Music Hall.

As a result of the west façade modernization, the Smithsonian and the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Officer (DC SHPO) concluded that the project would have adverse effects on historic properties. To mitigate these adverse effects, the Smithsonian and DC SHPO entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). The MOA stipulated that the "Gwenfritz" sculpture

by Alexander Calder would be returned to its original site and the reflecting pool above which the sculpture was situated would be reconstructed.

Proposal

The project includes the relocation of the Calder sculpture "Gwenfritz" to its original location, the re-establishment of the reflecting pool and modification to the plaza on the west side of the museum. In order to reconstruct the reflecting pool, the existing bandstand plinth and earth fill landscaping will be removed. The footprint of the reflecting pool will be restored including its surround and the sculpture base. A new pool base slab and finished pool floor will be installed. The depth of the pool will be reduced to a maximum of 24 inches. The pool floor will be white Pebble Tec and will simulate the original pool floor finish of tumbled stone set in a mortar bed. The Pebble Tec will be easier to maintain and clean than the original tumbled stone, but it will offer a similar visual appearance and texture. New pool equipment including pumps and filters as well as supply jets will be installed. Skimmers and drains, and all supply, return and drainage piping will be replaced. The Calder sculpture will be moved from its current location at the corner of Constitution Avenue and 14th Street to the restored sculpture base. The sculpture was moved to its current location at the northwest corner of the museum site to make room for a historic bandstand from Illinois, which has since been removed and returned. As part of the original installation, the sculpture was lit and new lights will be added to the pool to enhance viewing of the sculpture.

Landscaping will be added to the café terrace directly adjacent to the lower level cafeteria. The existing granite paving will remain in place and the existing Victory Garden and flanking planters will be re-planted with appropriate species such as Evergreen Foreground and Evergreen Backbone. Existing invasive species will be removed and existing trees protected. The landscaping will allow unobstructed views of the sculpture.

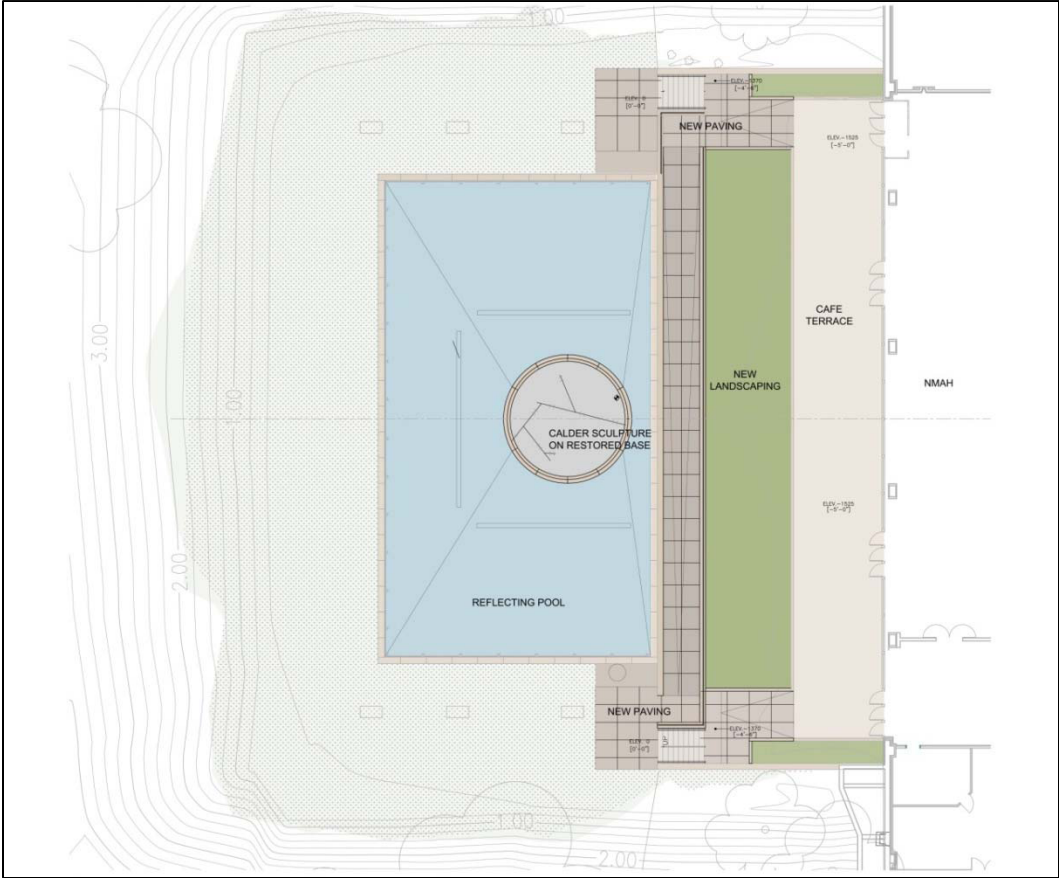
A new sloped walkway and retaining wall clad in Tennessee Marble will be constructed to make the pool area accessible to the disabled. Where fall protection is required, laminated glass railings will be installed to maximize the views towards the Calder sculpture. Handrails will be provided at the existing stairs which will remain in place. Lighting will be installed along the stairs as well as in the plaza and landscaped areas.



Existing west façade of the National Museum of American History



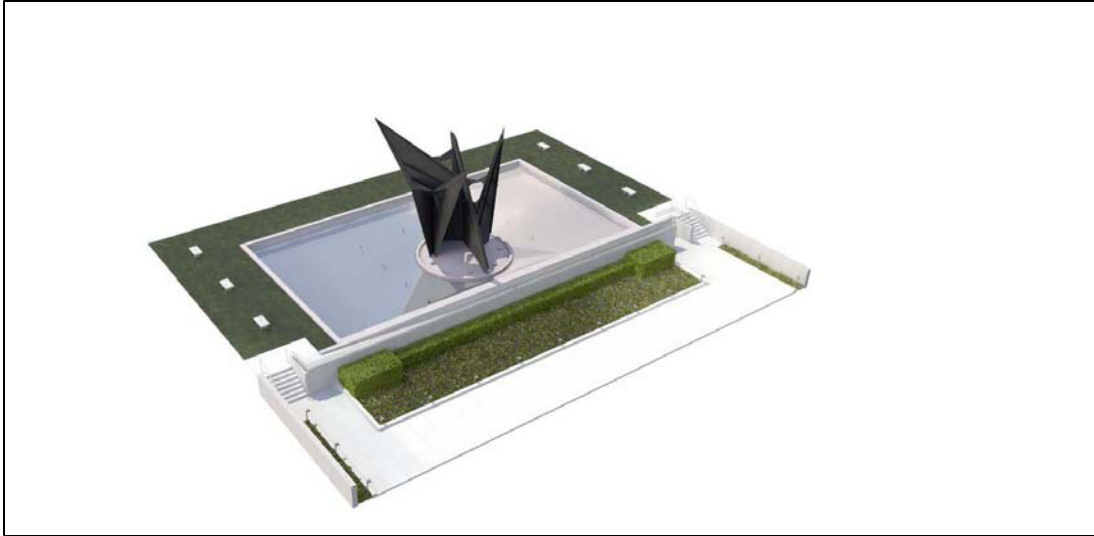
Photo rendering of proposed level 1 window, part of the west façade modernization project.



Site plan for the rehabilitation and relocation of the Calder sculpture.



Photo rendering of the reflecting pool, Calder sculpture, ramp, and Victory Garden from the café terrace



Rendering of Calder sculpture in rehabilitated reflecting pool, ramp, and café terrace



Lighting of Calder sculpture and café terrace

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Staff recommends that the Commission approve the preliminary and final site development plans for the relocation and rehabilitation of the Calder sculpture. The project is consistent with the mitigation proposed in the MOA for the west façade modernization project. In addition, the relocation of the Calder sculpture, re-establishment of the reflecting pool and restoration of the café terrace landscaping, along with site improvements to the café terrace paving and accessibility will further the goals of the NMAH master plan by improving vistas from the museum building and the building’s connection to its landscape. The new window proposed as part of the west façade modernization project will afford views to the relocated Calder sculpture. The relocation of the sculpture to its original location on axis with the museum will return it to the artist’s original vision for the sculpture’s setting, and relationship to the Mall and the NMAH.

CONFORMANCE

Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

Staff finds that the relocation and rehabilitation of the Calder sculpture is not inconsistent with the policies of the Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital, and in particular those policies pertaining to the image of the nation’s capital and federal visitor attractions.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

The Smithsonian is not a federal agency as defined in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), but when a project requires approval from a federal agency the Smithsonian may be required to conduct a NEPA review. NCPC has approval authority over the project and has a responsibility to comply with NEPA. In accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality’s rules for implementing NEPA, and the Commission’s Environmental and Historic Preservation Policies and Procedures, the Smithsonian prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the west façade modernization project. This EA included an analysis of the relocation of the Calder sculpture. The EA addressed the following topic areas: air quality, water, noise, energy conservation, solid water, transportation, economic resources, historic resources, visual resources, and environmental justice.

Of the environmental topic areas analyzed, staff’s analysis of the EA focused primarily on the potential impacts to historic and visual resources. Staff focused on these areas given the location of NMAH on the National Mall. On June 29, 2011, the NCPC Executive Director issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for “Alternative 1” stipulating that the west façade modernization project will not have a significant impact on the human environment with the implementation of the following mitigation measures: storage of any original stone removed for the window installation so that the stone can be reused if the façade is restored in the future, and the restoration and relocation of the Alexander Calder sculpture “Gwenfritz” to its original location and reconstruction of the reflecting pool.

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

The relocation of the Calder sculpture was mitigation for the west façade modernization project. Therefore, additional Section 106 consultation was not required for the project. As described in the MOA dated March 2, 2011 between the DC SHPO and the Smithsonian, mitigation for the adverse effect of the west façade modernization on the NMAH was to include the relocation and rehabilitation of the Calder sculpture to its original setting.

CONSULTATION

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed the proposal at its November 9, 2011 meeting, and forwarded the proposal to the Commission with the statement that the proposal has been coordinated with all participating agencies. The participating agencies were NCPC; the District of Columbia Office of Planning; the District Department of Transportation; the National Park Service; the General Services Administration; and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

Commission of Fine Arts

The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) will review the final design of the relocation and rehabilitation of the Calder sculpture at its November 17, 2011 meeting.