



Executive Director's Recommendation

Commission Meeting: July 9, 2020

PROJECT Freer Gallery of Art Courtyard Accessibility Improvements 1050 Independence Avenue, SW Washington, DC	NCPC FILE NUMBER 8182
	NCPC MAP FILE NUMBER 1.41(38.00)45147
SUBMITTED BY Smithsonian Institution	APPLICANT'S REQUEST Approval of comments on concept plans
REVIEW AUTHORITY Federal Projects in the District per 40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1) and (d)	PROPOSED ACTION Approve comments on concept plans
	ACTION ITEM TYPE Consent Calendar

PROJECT SUMMARY

The Smithsonian Institution (SI) has submitted concept plans for the proposed addition of an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant sloped walkway to the courtyard of the Freer Gallery of Art. The walkway will provide an accessible route from the west loggia down to the lower courtyard level. The project also includes renewal of the waterproofing system that underlies the courtyard, which will in turn require the replacement of the existing plantings. Today, the courtyard can only be reached by a series of steps, and therefore does not meet accessibility requirements. Since all visitors are not able to reach the below-grade courtyard, public access is restricted. Completion of the project will allow the public to enter and enjoy the courtyard.

Construction of the original museum building began in 1916 and concluded in 1923 when it was opened to the public. The museum is located on the National Mall, just southwest of the Smithsonian Castle at the intersection of Jefferson Drive and 12th Street SW. The Freer Gallery holds SI's premier collection of Asian art.

KEY INFORMATION

- The Freer Gallery of Art is located within the South Mall Campus of the Smithsonian Institution just southwest of the Castle.
- The building was designed by Charles Platt in the Renaissance Revival style and opened to the public in 1923.
- The Freer Gallery of Art is a contributing resource to the National Mall Historic District and was listed in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites in 1964. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1969.
- The plantings within the courtyard have changed over time, and were most recently updated around 1990.

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- The current courtyard is not accessible to the public because the space is sunken from the surrounding building levels and can only be accessed through a series of steps.
 - The project will provide a sloped walkway to permit ADA access to the courtyard. This improvement will occur in conjunction with the replacement of the courtyard waterproofing which is 30 years old and at the end of its functional life. Museum spaces are located beneath the courtyard which will be protected with new waterproofing. New plantings will also be provided as part of the project.
 - The Freer Gallery of Art is located within the South Mall Campus Master Plan which was approved by NCPC in 2018. One of the main goals and objectives of the Master Plan is to improve accessibility within the campus.
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RECOMMENDATION

The Commission:

Supports the goal of project to provide ADA-access to the Freer Gallery of Art courtyard for public use and enjoyment.

Notes the proposed project is consistent with the goals for improved accessibility set forth in the South Mall Campus Master Plan which was approved by the Commission in 2018.

Finds the overall design approach is appropriate for the project purpose and historic courtyard setting, and that details of the ramp design and hardscape will be further refined prior to the next review.

Recommends the applicant continue to develop the proposed landscape design while considering the original design intent, museum mission, and climatic conditions within the courtyard.

PROJECT REVIEW TIMELINE

Previous actions	None
Remaining actions (anticipated)	Review of preliminary and final site development plans

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Executive Summary

The proposed new sloped walkway will permit ADA access into the courtyard of the Freer Gallery of Art. The public cannot currently enjoy this historic space. As part of the project, the waterproofing beneath the courtyard will be replaced and new plantings will be installed. Overall, the proposed intervention has been designed in a manner that is minimally intrusive to the existing courtyard design while meeting the project goal of providing an accessible route.

Staff has considered the policies set forth in the Visitor and Commemoration and Historic Preservation Elements and finds the proposed project will help improve access to the space and museum with a relatively modest intervention. Project development will continue to further avoid and/or minimize any impacts to the historic building and courtyard. As such, staff recommends the **Commission support the goal of project to provide ADA-access to the Freer Gallery of Art courtyard for public use and enjoyment.** Further, staff notes the proposed project is consistent with the goals for improved accessibility set forth in the South Mall Campus Master Plan which was approved by the Commission in 2018. Additional details regarding the walkway, hardscape, and landscape design will be refined prior to preliminary and final review.

Analysis

The project includes the addition of an ADA-compliant sloped walkway to the courtyard of the Freer Gallery of Art, providing an accessible route from the west loggia down to the lower courtyard level. The project will remove and replace the waterproofing beneath the courtyard as it is nearing the end of its life. Museum spaces beneath the courtyard depend on the waterproofing for protection. Finally, as part of the project, the trees and plantings will be replaced. The project is expected to be completed in time for the museum's 2023 centennial celebrations.

The Freer Gallery of Art was designed by architect Charles Platt between 1912 and 1916. Platt collaborated closely on the building design with collector and museum founder Charles Lang Freer, whose original design concept for the museum included natural illumination of interior exhibition galleries and a courtyard. The building opened to the public in May 1923. The courtyard was constructed at a lower elevation than the main exhibition gallery level, and is connected by granite steps to covered east and west side loggias and to interior doors on the north and south sides.

In conjunction with the development of the quadrangle site in the late 1980s, a number of additions and alterations were implemented that included an underground connection from the Quadrangle Building to the east and infill of the unexcavated area beneath the courtyard. The courtyard's landscaping treatments were replaced at the time the waterproofing systems were installed.

The proposed project includes a new ramp from the west loggia to the north end of the courtyard with a sloped walkway with detailing reflecting the historic building. This side was selected due

to its proximity to the Main Floor's accessible entrance, and because the area north of the landing allows more space for the walkway. The proposed slope is less than five percent. A planter width is provided adjacent to the new walkway and the planted areas in the other three quadrants of the courtyard are proposed to be slightly widened to maintain alignments with pavement edges. Integration of the proposed walkway into the planted area maintains the overall symmetry of the space. The new paving and ramp materials reflect the original courtyard materials, including Tennessee Pink marble for the wall panels, cap stones and plinths, along with Milford Pink granite for the paving at the new walkway. Existing stonework will be salvaged and reinstalled where possible. New handrails will be dark bronze to match the vocabulary of the building's original architectural metalwork.

Overall, the walkway has been designed to be minimally intrusive to the historic character of the courtyard with elements such as the handrails located to have nominal impact to historic fabric around the courtyard. As such, staff recommends the **Commission find the overall design approach is appropriate for the project purpose and historic courtyard setting, and that details of the ramp design and hardscape will be further refined prior to the next review.**

The proposed landscape concept seeks to balance the original design while also establishing an interpretive connection with the museum's collection. As such, Asian plants have been selected for the design. Specimen trees are proposed to anchor the corners of the courtyard and a mix of low evergreen and deciduous shrubs and groundcovers interwoven will be placed around the perimeter of the courtyard and water fountain. Seasonal color will be integrated in the planting scheme. The initial plant list has been developed in coordination with Smithsonian Gardens.

Staff notes that the courtyard planting has evolved over time since the museum's initial opening in 1923. SI and the design team have relied on historic photos to understand the evolution of the space in the absence of any original planting plan or plant lists. The earliest images suggest a subdued planting character. In 1928, shortly after the museum opened, brick panels within the paving were removed and replaced with turf to help reduce the solar heat gain during the summer. The grass areas were returned to brick paving around 1990 when the courtyard and plantings were removed and reinstalled as part of the museum's underground renovations. Additional trees were introduced after 1990, along with a variety of plantings within the borders, resulting in the current landscape character. The landscape approach will be further refined, and several interests should be balanced in developing the design. In particular, staff suggests the **Commission recommend the applicant continue to develop the proposed landscape design while considering the original design intent, museum mission, and climatic conditions within the courtyard.**

CONFORMANCE TO EXISTING PLANS, POLICIES AND RELATED GUIDANCE

Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

Staff has evaluated the project based upon the policies set forth in the Visitor and Commemoration and Historic Preservation Elements of the Comprehensive Plan. In general, the project is consistent

with goals to improve accessibility to cultural facilities within the national capital. The improvements will need to be balanced with any potential impacts to historic properties.

National Historic Preservation Act

SI and NCPC each have an independent responsibility to comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The Freer Gallery of Art is a contributing resource to the National Mall Historic District and is also individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places. SI initiated Section 106 consultation on June 2, 2020. Staff notes that the consultation process will continue to further avoid and/or minimize any impacts to historic properties.

National Environmental Policy Act

NCPC has an independent responsibility for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for federal projects located within the District of Columbia. At this time, categorical exclusion #2 may be applicable to the proposed project. The categorical exclusion applies to the approval of the installation or restoration of minor site elements, such as but not limited to identification signs, sidewalks, patios, fences, curbs, retaining walls, landscaping, and trail or stream improvements. NEPA compliance will be completed at the time of final review.

CONSULTATION

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed the concept plans at their June 16, 2020 and forwarded the application to the Commission stating the project had been coordinated with all participating agencies. Participating agencies include the National Park Service, General Services Administration, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, the District Department of Transportation, the District of Columbia Office of Planning and the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Office (DC SHPO). The DC SHPO stated their coordination was subject to conclusion of the Section 106 review process. The District Department of Energy and Environment indicated additional coordination is necessary and that an erosion and sediment control plan is needed.

U.S. Commission of Fine Arts

The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) reviewed the concept plans for the project at their June 18, 2020 meeting. The concept was approved with comments primarily focused on the landscape design. A copy of the letter is attached.

ONLINE REFERENCE

The following supporting documents for this project are available online at www.ncpc.gov:

- Submission Package
- Project Summary

Prepared by Matthew Flis
07/01/2020

ATTACHMENTS

- Powerpoint
- CFA letter

Freer Gallery of Art Improve Courtyard Accessibility

1050 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington DC

Comments on Concept Plans

Smithsonian Institution

Site Location



Location Map

Project Location



Existing Conditions

Existing Conditions

The Freer Gallery of Art is a contributing resource to the National Mall Historic District and was listed in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites in 1964. It was listed in National Register of Historic Places in 1969.

The museum is described by the Smithsonian Institution as follows:

The Freer Gallery of Art was designed by architect Charles Platt between 1912 and 1916. Platt collaborated closely on the building design with collector and museum founder Charles Lang Freer, whose original design concept for the museum included natural illumination of interior exhibition galleries and a courtyard. The completed building opened to the public in May, 1923 with top-lit exhibition galleries connected by circulation corridors that overlook a garden courtyard. The courtyard was constructed at a slightly lower elevation than the main exhibition gallery level, and is connected by granite steps to covered east and west side loggias and to interior doors on the north and south sides. All of the original bronze and glass courtyard perimeter doors and windows remain intact and operational, but they are too fragile to sustain regular use.

In conjunction with the development of the quadrangle site in the late 1980s, a number of additions and alterations were implemented that included an underground connection from the Quadrangle Building and an infill of the unexcavated area beneath the courtyard on the Ground Floor and Basement levels. This work entailed the reconstruction and renewal of the courtyard's landscaping treatments at which time the existing waterproofing systems were installed.

In the late 1990s, a modification was made to the existing courtyard perimeter doors to add (2) contemporary glass door inserts at south corridor loggia door locations. The historic doors at these locations were retained and are left in the open position. The new doors were intended to provide improved visitor access to the exterior loggias, and each door is configured in a single leaf that swings in both directions and can be secured with a cylinder lock with bolt that inserts into the door threshold. There are no secondary doors to prevent outside air infiltration when the insert doors are in use, but observation suggests that the impact of the new doors on museum climate control has been minimal (except when doors are held or propped open for after-hours event staging).



COURTYARD ENTRANCE FROM SOUTH CORRIDOR

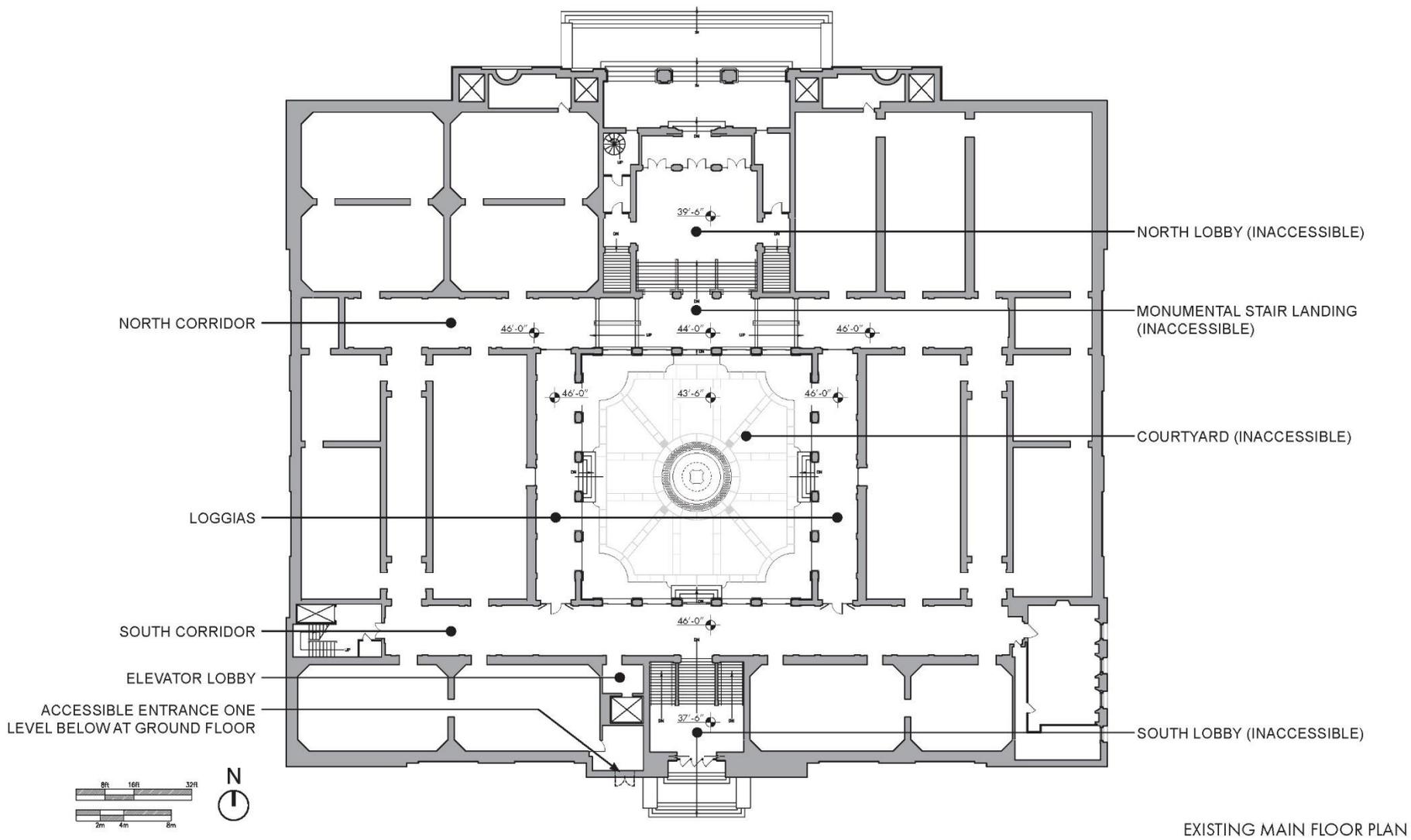


WEST LOGGIA LOOKING SOUTH



COURTYARD LOOKING NORTH

Existing Conditions - Accessibility



Existing Conditions



COLUMN BASE AT LOGGIA STEPS



VIEW OF COURTYARD LOOKING EAST FROM WEST LOGGIA



LOGGIA STEPS



COURTYARD FOUNTAIN



TYPICAL CORNER OF COURTYARD

EXISTING PHOTOGRAPHS

Evolution of Courtyard

Evolution of Courtyard Planting

The character of the courtyard planting has evolved over time since the museum's opening in May 1923. In the absence of any original planting plan or plant lists prepared at that time, there are many historic photographs taken over the 20th century and at various times of the year that suggests the character of the landscape took in terms of shape and texture. The earliest photo, dated 1923 when the plantings were new, suggests a rather subdued planting character with perhaps a mix of evergreen species. Wisteria appears in the 1925 photo on the south facing wall.

In 1928, shortly after the museum opened, (8) brick panels within the paving where removed and replaced with turf to help reduce the solar heat gain during the summer. The turf grass areas were returned to brick paving around 1990 when the courtyard and plantings were removed and reinstalled as part of the museum's subgrade renovations. The plantings were most likely changed throughout the 20th century as shrubs and plantings became overgrown and season perennials were added and maintained. After 1990, more trees were introduced along with a variety of plantings within the borders resulting in the current day character described in the existing landscape conditions section.



Existing Landscape

Existing Landscape Conditions

Currently the planting character of the courtyard is defined by predominantly tree planting and minimal understory planting that were installed as part of the major rehabilitation in the early 1990's when the courtyard was reconstructed. Based on review of historical photographs, the courtyard planting treatments have been replaced throughout the museum's history and the current plantings are not original nor historical. The tree plantings have outgrown the space, and despite significant maintenance effort, they obscure the architectural facades and block views into the courtyard from the loggias. Even if there were no need to replace the waterproofing under the courtyard, the existing landscaping is arguably overdue for substantial revitalization.

There are eight Persian Ironwood, *Parrotia persica* trees on the north and south facades. The trees have been limbed up and pruned into formal oval shape to mimic the arches of the windows, and significantly block the views into the courtyard from the internal corridors. Four Japanese Maples, *Acer palmatum* trees flank the loggias, which provide some shade, but significantly obscure views into the courtyard from the loggias.

The understory plantings are minimal, with small clipped boxwood, *Buxus* hedges in the planters of each quadrant and a Hinoki False cypress - *Chamaecyparis obtuse 'compacta'* holding each corner. There are small round boxwood shrubs around the base of the fountain, and a pair free standing planter pots at each set of stairs planted with seasonal plantings.

There are four steel surface drains in the stone radial pavement bands that capture drainage from the pavement surface. The courtyard planters are currently irrigated and the existence of underdrainage for the planters is unknown. Based on record documents, the soil depth is approximately 12 inches on a gravel base but may vary slightly throughout as some slight mounding is visible up to the edge of the building.

The paving consists of red clay brick pavers in a herringbone pattern bordered and divided by granite bands, with a granite border framing the central paved space. The central fountain basin and coping are granite. It is expected the fountain will remain in place and protected during the waterproofing repairs unless further issues are discovered during the initial evaluation that would require removal and reinstallation of the fountain system.



ROUND BOXWOODS AT BASE OF FOUNTAIN



JAPANESE MAPLES FLANKING LOGGIA



HINOKI FALSE CYPRESS IN EACH OF THE FOUR CORNERS



PERSIAN IRONWOOD ALONG NORTH AND SOUTH FACADES

Accessible Route

Accessible Route

There are presently two accessible routes to the Main Floor of the Freer Gallery. One begins at a street level entrance from Independence Avenue into a mid-floor elevator lobby where an elevator can be taken to the Main Floor above or the Ground Floor below. The other accessible route originates from the Sackler pavilion through the Lower Level connection into the Freer via an elevator located adjacent to the open stair near the Meyer Auditorium. From there, the route continues through the South Corridor toward the Independence Avenue Lobby to the Ground Floor elevator lobby at which point a separate elevator (the same elevator serving the Independence Avenue entrance) can be taken to the Main Floor.

In either route, the visitor arrives at the South Corridor of the Main Floor on its south side from an elevator lobby located next to the Independence Avenue Lobby and stair.

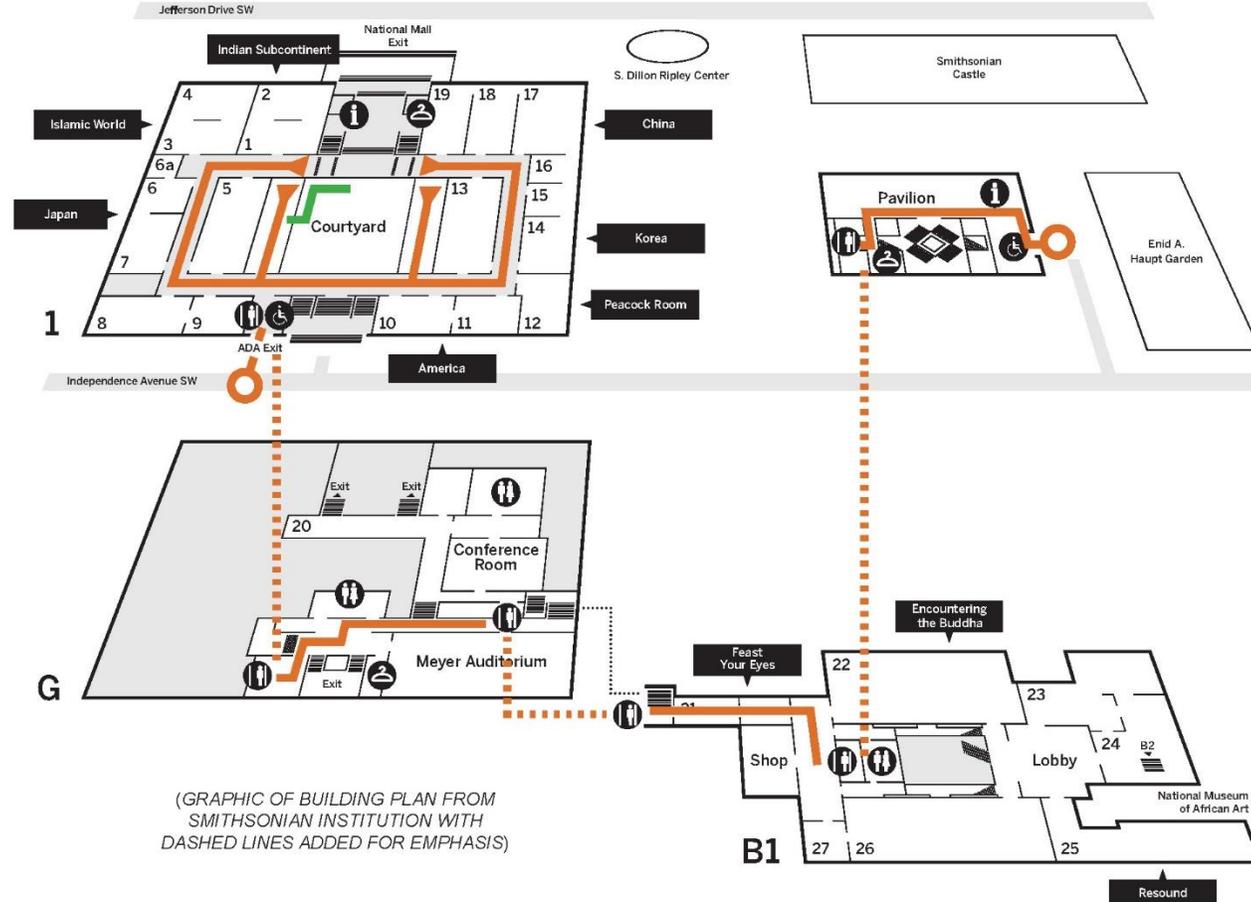
With the exception of the Courtyard, the Main Floor is almost fully accessible except for where the North Corridor is interrupted by two pair of steps in series. While this sunken section of Corridor is itself inaccessible, the more significant limitation is that it prevents many visitors from circulating continuously through the Gallery resulting in a horseshoe-shaped circulation pattern.

LEGEND

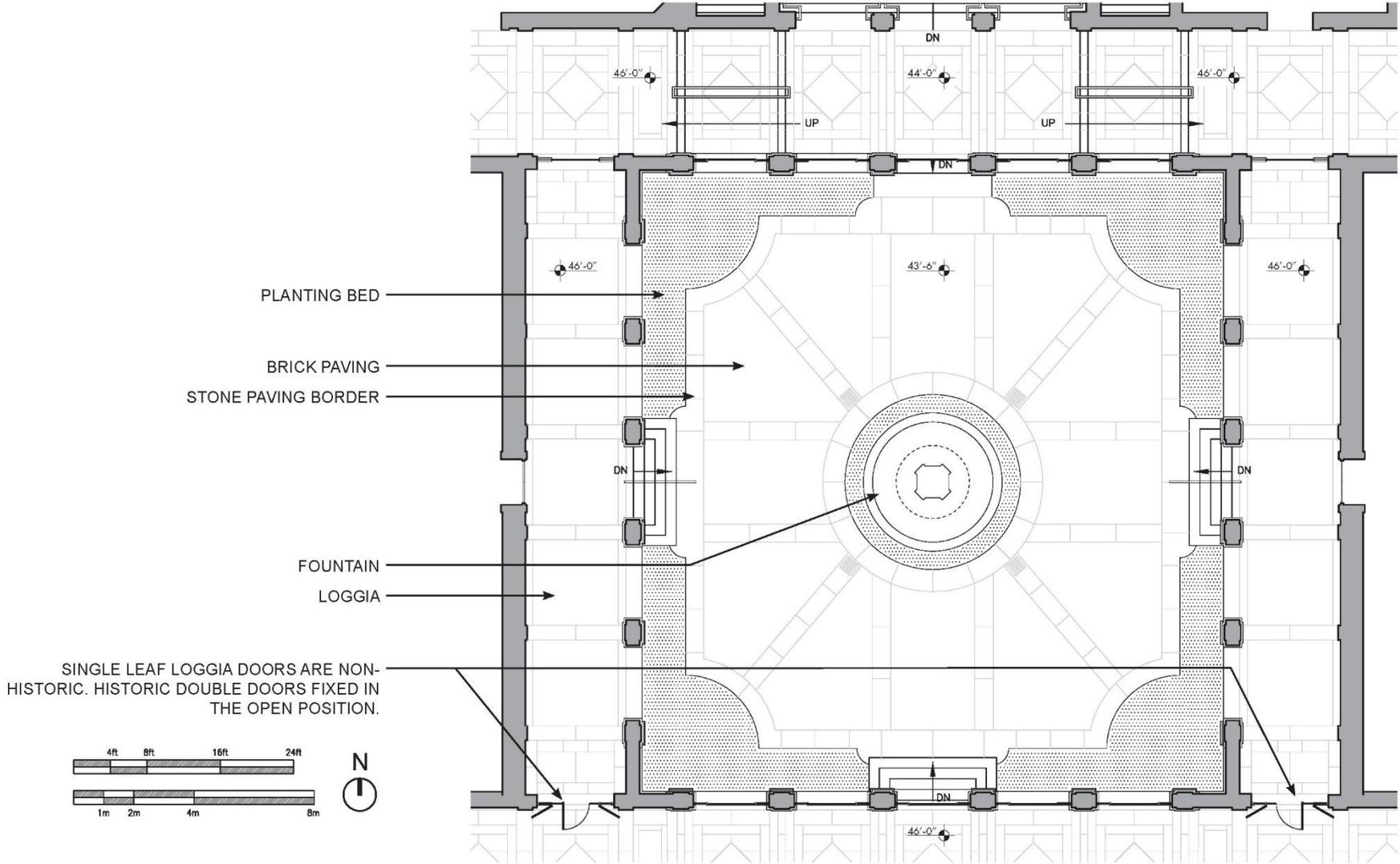
-  HORIZONTAL PORTION OF ACCESSIBLE PATH
-  VERTICAL PORTION OF ACCESSIBLE PATH
-  DEADEND OF ACCESSIBLE PATH
-  ACCESSIBLE MUSEUM ENTRY/EXIT
-  PROPOSED SLOPED WALKWAY

FREER GALLERY OF ART

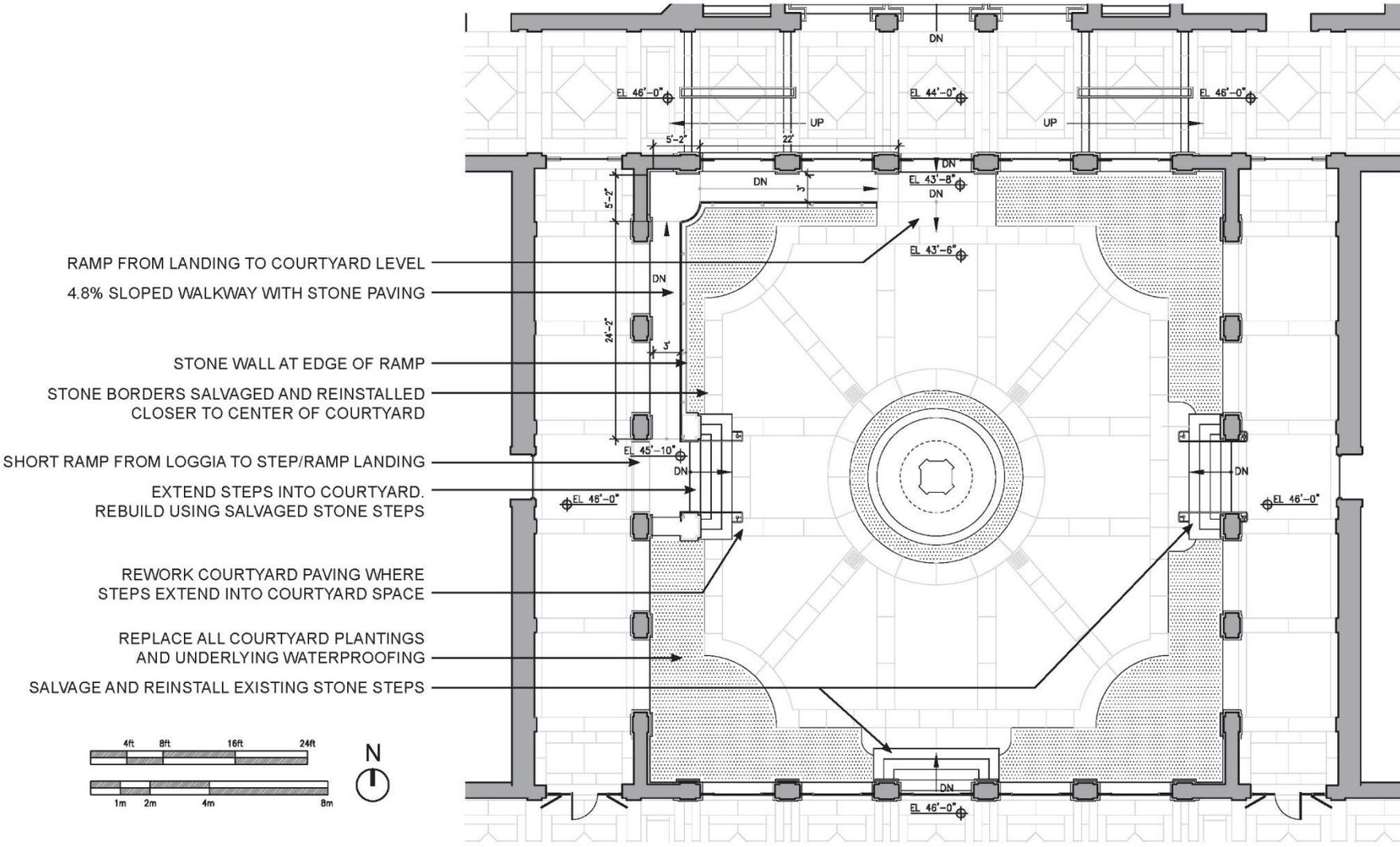
ARTHUR M. SACKLER GALLERY



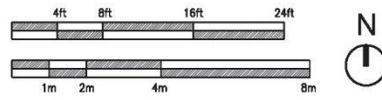
Existing Courtyard Plan



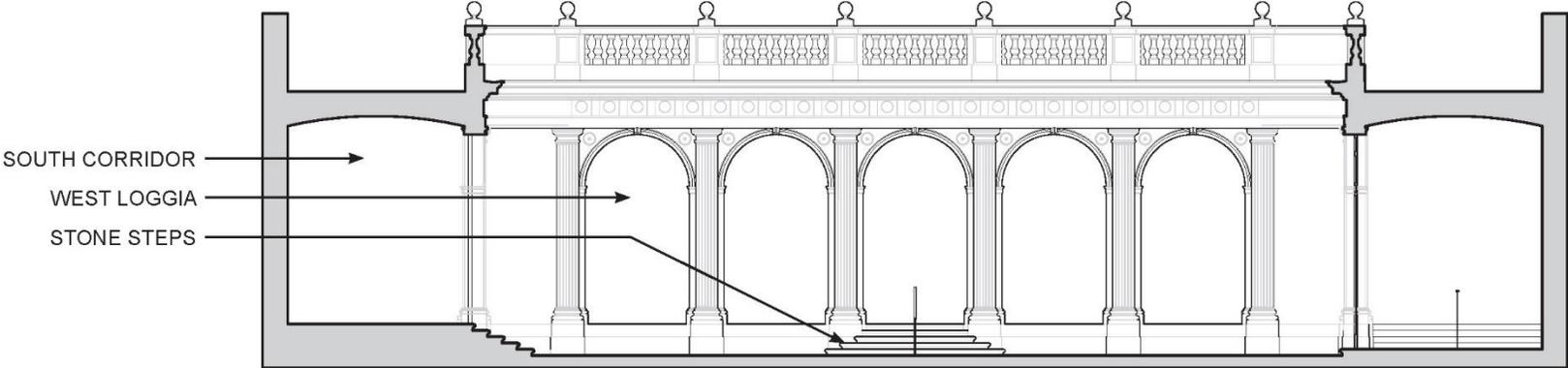
Proposed Courtyard Plan



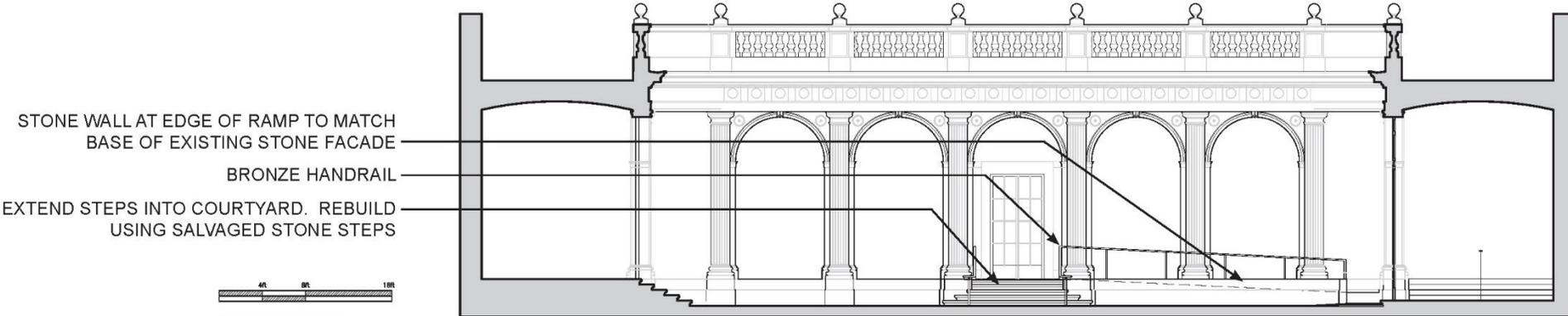
- RAMP FROM LANDING TO COURTYARD LEVEL
- 4.8% SLOPED WALKWAY WITH STONE PAVING
- STONE WALL AT EDGE OF RAMP
- STONE BORDERS SALVAGED AND REINSTALLED CLOSER TO CENTER OF COURTYARD
- SHORT RAMP FROM LOGGIA TO STEP/RAMP LANDING
- EXTEND STEPS INTO COURTYARD. REBUILD USING SALVAGED STONE STEPS
- REWORK COURTYARD PAVING WHERE STEPS EXTEND INTO COURTYARD SPACE
- REPLACE ALL COURTYARD PLANTINGS AND UNDERLYING WATERPROOFING
- SALVAGE AND REINSTALL EXISTING STONE STEPS



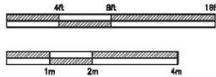
Project Section – North/South



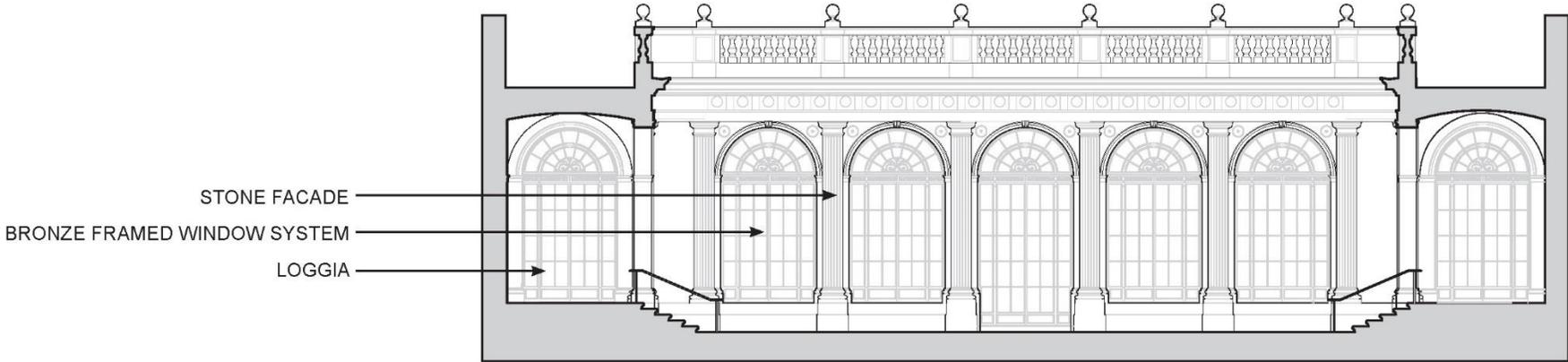
EXISTING



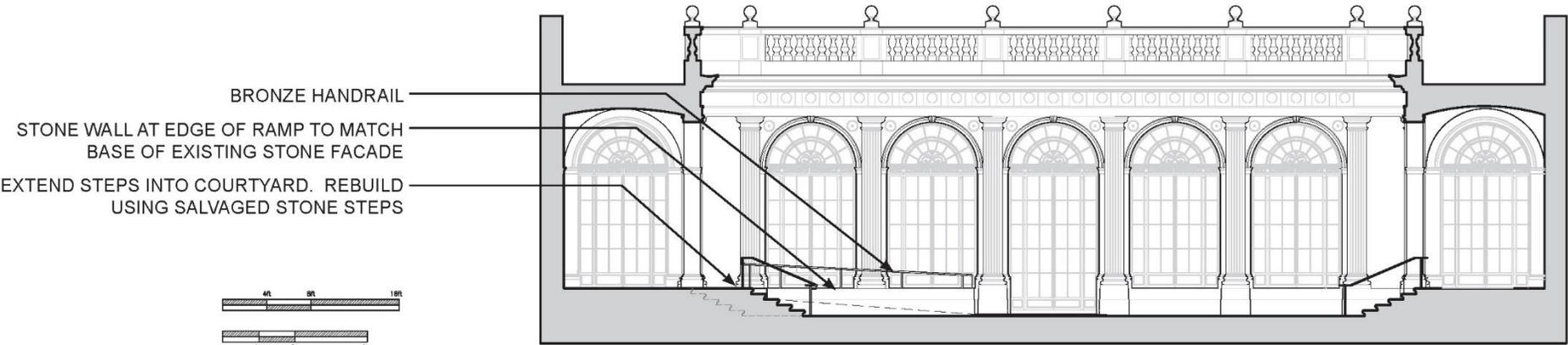
PROPOSED



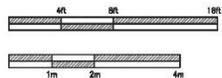
Project Section – East/West



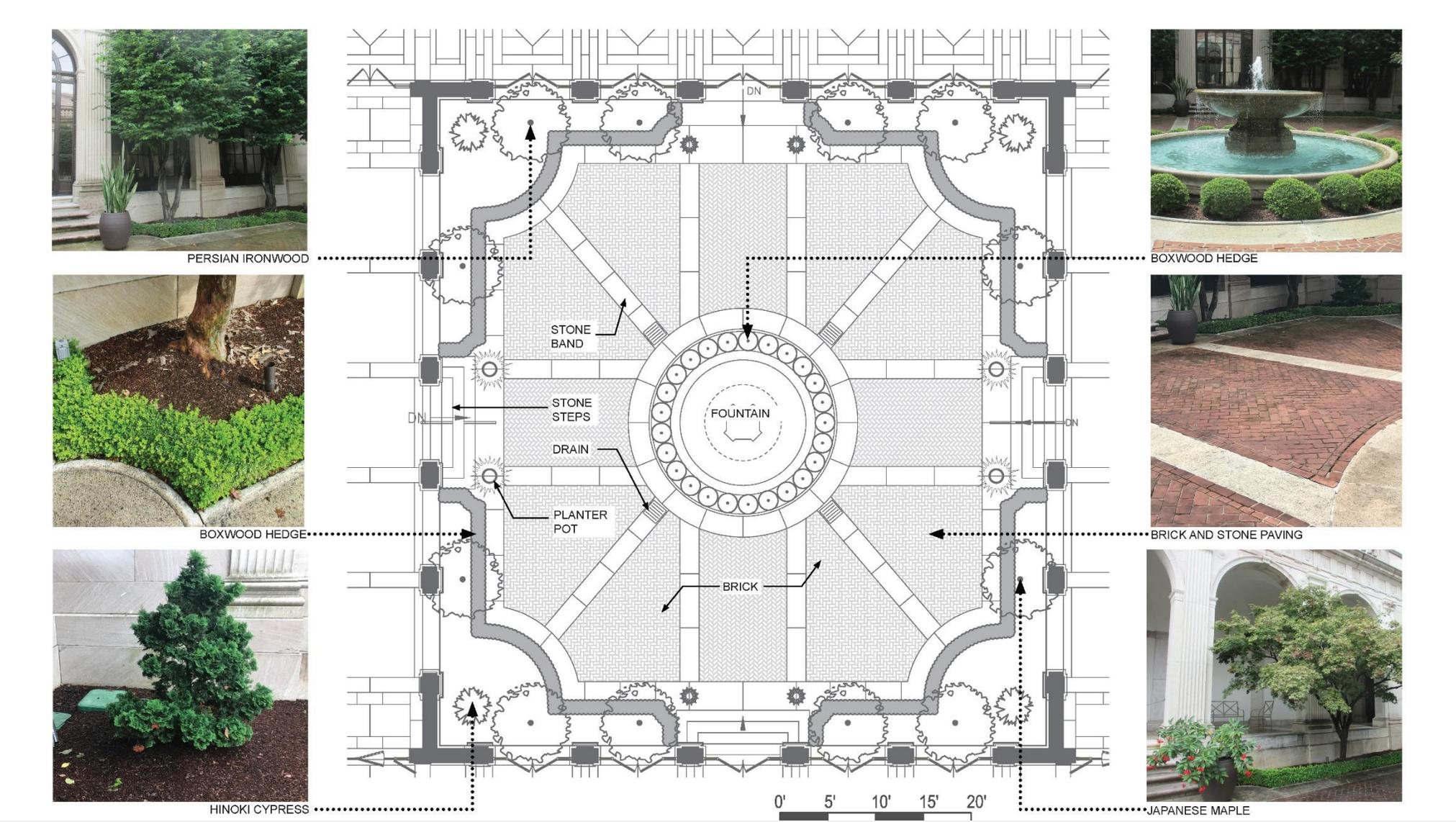
EXISTING



PROPOSED



Existing Courtyard Landcapse



PERSIAN IRONWOOD



BOXWOOD HEDGE



HINOKI CYPRESS



BOXWOOD HEDGE

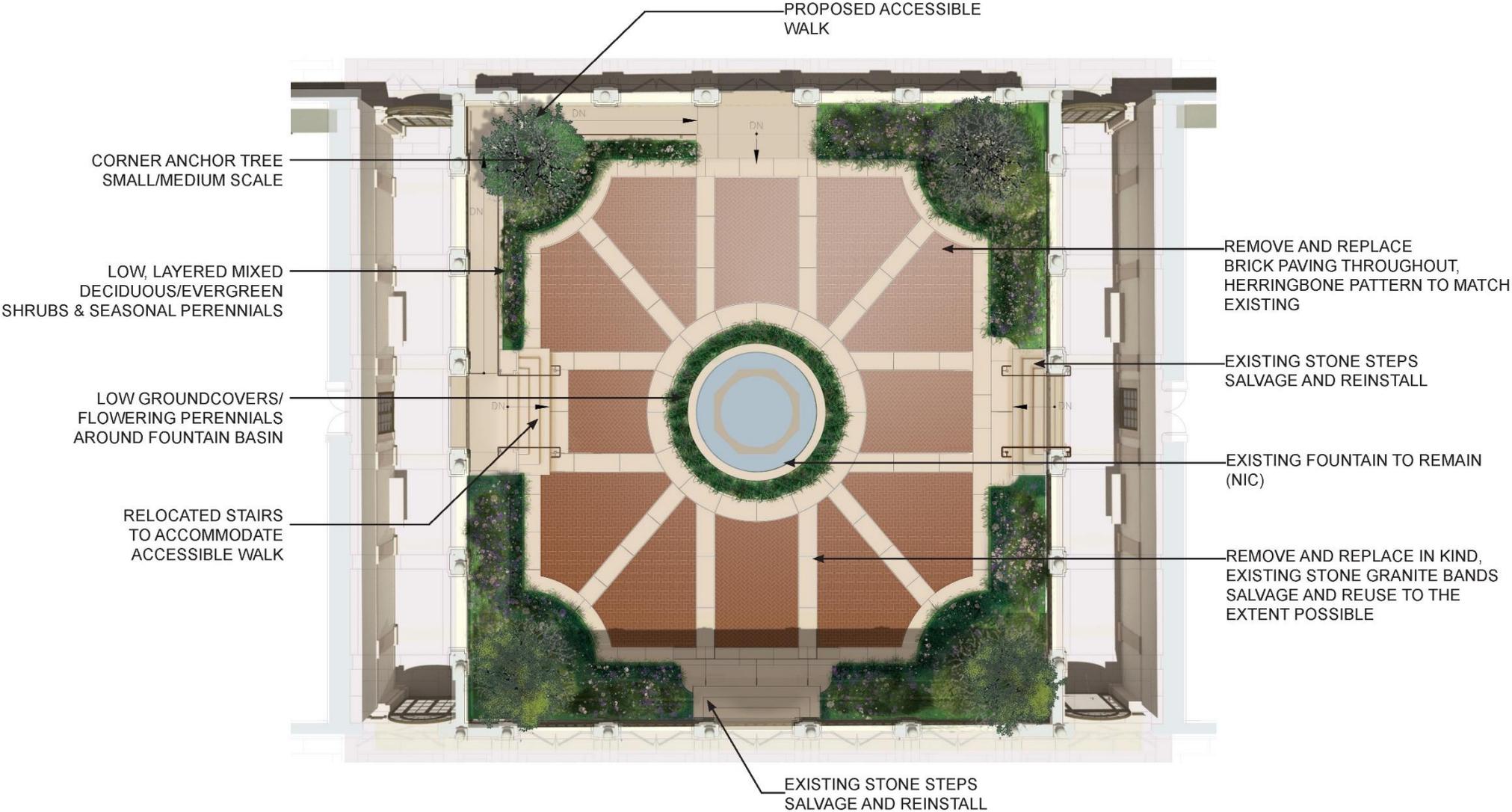


BRICK AND STONE PAVING



JAPANESE MAPLE

Proposed Landscape Plan



Preliminary Planting Palette

SPECIMEN TREES AS ANCHOR PLANTS



SHRUBS



PERENNIALS / GRASSES / GROUNDCOVERS



PRELIMINARY PLANT PALETTE

Project Rendering



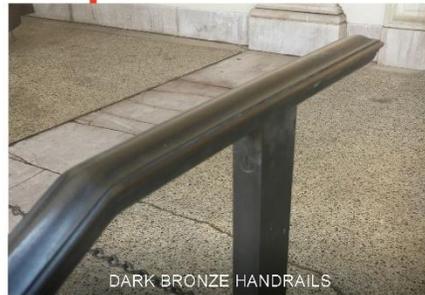
Project Rendering



MILFORD PINK GRANITE STONE PAVERS/
BORDERS TO MATCH ORIGINAL/EXISTING



TENNESSEE PINK MARBLE STONE TO MATCH
ORIGINAL/EXISTING



DARK BRONZE HANDRAILS



BRICK PAVERS TO MATCH ORIGINAL/EXISTING

MATERIALS

Project Rendering



VIEW LOOKING NORTHWEST FROM SOUTHEAST CORNER OF COURTYARD

Project Rendering



VIEW LOOKING NORTH FROM WEST LOGGIA

Overhead View



OVERHEAD VIEW

U.S. COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS

ESTABLISHED BY CONGRESS 17 MAY 1910

401 F STREET NW SUITE 312 WASHINGTON DC 20001-2728 202-504-2200 FAX 202-504-2195 WWW.CFA.GOV

25 June 2020

Dear Mr. Robinson:

In its public meeting of 18 June conducted by videoconference, the Commission of Fine Arts reviewed a concept design for landscape and accessibility improvements in the courtyard of the Freer Gallery of Art, to be undertaken in conjunction with replacement of the waterproofing of the structure below it. The Commission approved the concept with the following comments and recommendations.

The Commission members expressed general support for the proposed placement of a sloped walkway along two sides of the courtyard to provide barrier-free access to the courtyard level from the museum's adjacent corridors and for adjustments to the courtyard landscape, endorsing the conceptual approach of honoring the character of the original Renaissance Revival design by Charles Platt. They supported the proposal for the sloped walkway as derived from the existing architecture while minimizing change to the courtyard; they suggested that the generic character of the bronze handrails along the sloped walkway could be customized in a subtle way to refer to the museum's mission and collections.

For the design of the landscape, they requested further development of the concept, supporting the intended approach to draw inspiration from the museum's artworks, but which should also be informed by the work of Platt, who began his career as a designer of landscapes; they suggested that his legacy of executed landscapes and publications on Italian gardens should be considered more carefully as part of the design process. They commented that the current proposal lacks the lush character and prevalence of evergreen plants seen in the courtyard's historic landscape designs; they recommended that the landscape be adapted in the spirit of Platt's work rather than specifically restored, using substitutions of the plant palette to address thematic and microclimatic change. They acknowledged the constraint of the shallow planting depth resulting from the building area inserted beneath it in the 1980s; they observed that this condition will necessarily guide plant selections, noting that pots could be used to augment the range of plantings, and that trees may not be appropriate in the new design.

The Commission looks forward to further review of this project that builds upon the great legacy of the museum's design and its collections. For the development of the design, including the plant palette and the details of the new walkway, steps, and railings, the Commission requested that the project team consult with the staff which, as always, is available to assist you.

Sincerely,



Thomas E. Luebke, FAIA
Secretary

Chase Robinson, Director
Freer Gallery of Art
Smithsonian Institution
P.O. Box 37012, MRC 707
Washington, DC 20013-7012

cc: Scott Teixeira, Hartman-Cox Architects
Kurt Parker, Rhodeside & Harwell