

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

NCPC File No. 6479



SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
PATENT OFFICE BUILDING – COURTYARD LANDSCAPE
G, F, 7th, and 9th Streets, NW, Washington, D.C.

Submitted by the Smithsonian Institution

June 29, 2006

Abstract

The Smithsonian Institution has submitted final site development plans for a courtyard landscape at the Patent Office Building. The Commission reviewed the proposed elements of a courtyard landscape concept at its September 8, 2005 meeting, commenting favorably on the Smithsonian's acknowledgement that the courtyard be designed and function as a "public amenity" and that the "design character and setting" of the original courtyard be retained in the new courtyard. At its April 6, 2006 meeting, the Commission approved preliminary site development plans for the courtyard landscape, with the exception of the catering benches and the configuration of the water scrim. The Commission concurred with the Smithsonian that the two cast-iron fountains were in fair to poor condition and that "in partial mitigation for the loss of the historic courtyard, they instead be treated as artifacts and interpreted in the permanent exhibit on the history of the building in a gallery inside the F Street entrance."

The current submission responds to the Commission's recommendations for the courtyard design. It also simplifies the planting plan and proposes a revised paving pattern for the courtyard floor. The Smithsonian has submitted a concept for an exhibit on the historic building fabric in a small room off the F Street entrance to the building. This exhibit is where the cast iron fountains and the courtyard will be interpreted. The Smithsonian has also submitted a publication on which a long-term exhibit on the history of the Patent Office Building has been based. That exhibit is installed in the building. The submission of the preliminary plans for the reservation landscape plan and stair reconstruction has not been submitted this month to allow the Smithsonian additional time to study and consult on possible security design.

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

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

Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

Approves the final site development plans for the reconstruction of the courtyard landscape, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 21.00(38.00)42060.

Notes that the Smithsonian Institution:

- Has developed a courtyard design that will allow the courtyard to serve as a public amenity for all visitors to the Patent Office Building and that the Smithsonian has fulfilled the mitigation measures required by the Commission when it approved the final site and building plans for the courtyard enclosure in September 2005 with the exception of the installation of the fountains.
- Has responded to the Commission's April 2006 action by submitting a concept for an exhibit installation on the interpretation of the cast iron fountains and their original courtyard setting in partial mitigation for their removal and loss, and that the Commission looks forward to further review of the exhibit proposal as it is developed.

* * *

PROJECT SUMMARYSite Description

The Patent Office Building occupies Reservation 8 in the L'Enfant Plan, situated on the 8th Street cross-axis in the L'Enfant Plan 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 that concluded shortly after the Civil War. It is recognized by historians as one of the most significant Greek Revival-style buildings in the nation. The building opened to the public as Smithsonian museums in 1968. Following the recent rehabilitation of the interior, the museums reopen to the public on July 1, 2006.

Background

At its April 6, 2006 meeting, the Commission approved the preliminary plans for the courtyard landscape, except for the catering bars and the configuration of the water scrim. The reinstallation of the cast-iron fountains has been promised by the Smithsonian in partial mitigation for the demolition of the courtyard. As an alternative, the Smithsonian committed to their treatment as artifacts and to interpreting them in a museum exhibit.

At its September 8, 2005 meeting, the Commission approved the installation of a canopy over the courtyard, with conditions for mitigation measures to which the Smithsonian committed. These measures included the reconstruction of a courtyard landscape and the restoration to working order 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 that would restore its extent and character. The Commission accepted the Smithsonian's commitment to use trust funds and donated funds to complete all mitigation measures for which appropriated funds were unavailable.

Prior Commission Action

At the April 6, 2006 meeting, the Commission took the following action:

Approves the preliminary site development plans for the reconstruction of the courtyard landscape, with the exception of the catering benches and the configuration of the water scrim, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 21.00(38.00)41998.

Disapproves the catering benches as designed and located, and recommends that the primary catering utilities and storage be removed from the courtyard.

Recommends that the water scrim be redesigned to be more responsive to the “design character and setting” of the courtyard as a central gathering space, softening the scrim’s dominant linearity across the courtyard floor in order to improve its compatibility with the courtyard facades and spatial proportions.

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 the permanent exhibit on the history of the building in a gallery inside the F Street entrance.

Requires that, prior to final submission of the courtyard landscape, the Smithsonian develop a plan for the introduction and interpretation of the historic fountains in the museum exhibit and publications.

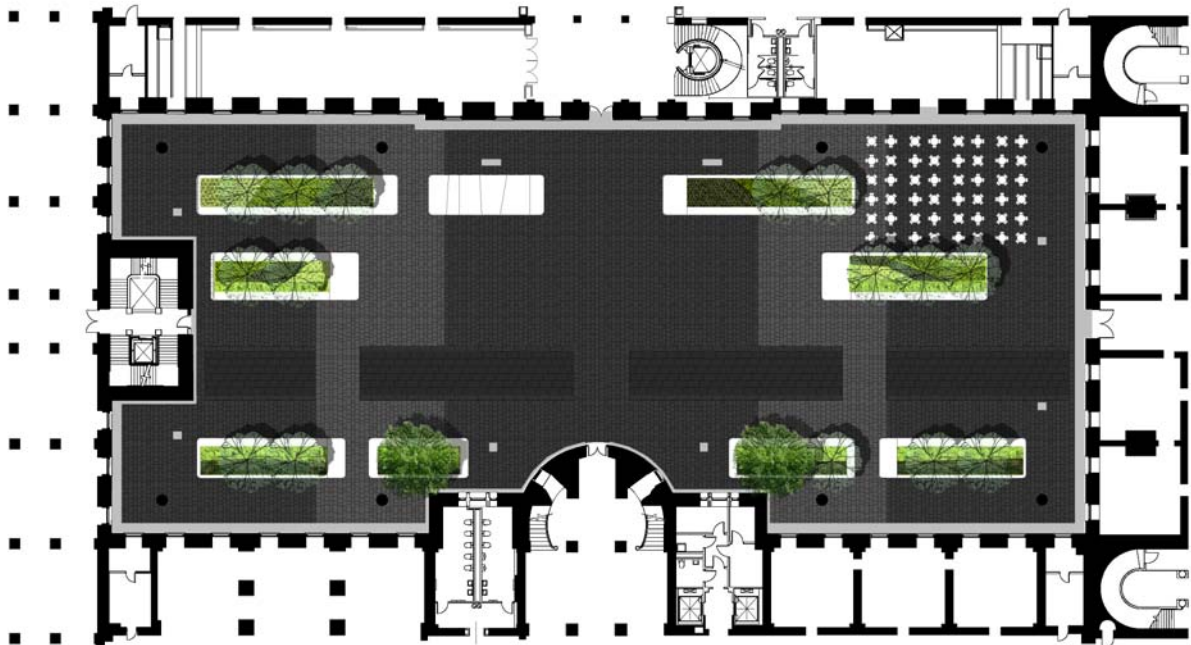
Proposal

The landscape design has been developed and revised from the preliminary site development plans the Commission reviewed in April 2006 in the following manner:

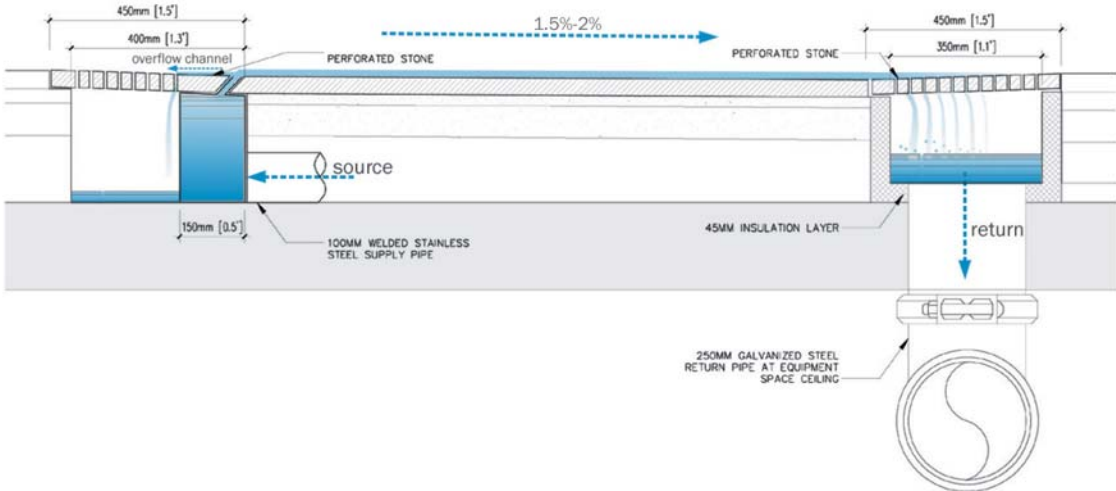
- The catering benches have been removed. Catering equipment will be stored elsewhere and set up in the courtyard when needed for an event.
- The water scrim is in the same location within the courtyard. It has been shortened slightly at either end (a little over 4 feet) so that it does not extend to the east and west courtyard facades. The metal grates running along both long edges of the scrim have been removed to soften its linearity. The water will circulate through perforated granite pavers.
- The overall floor pattern has been simplified so that there are fewer changes from the light to dark granite. The paving stones themselves have been redesigned. The previous plan showed square stones set on the diagonal. The current plan shows smaller stones of random and varied dimension, set in linear fashion in north-south rows.
- The planting plan for the planter/benches in the courtyard has been simplified, with the removal of the sub-canopy tree layer. The plant palette, designed in coordination with the Smithsonian Horticulture Division, was selected to be suitable for the environment of the courtyard and for anticipated maintenance levels. Two majestic trees are proposed for either side of the south apse—*Ficus rugibinosa* or *Ficus nitida* are being considered. For the canopy level, *Bucida buceras* (“Shady Lady”), planted 20 feet high, would provide a light evergreen cover. Below the tree level, layers of shrubs and groundcovers, including ferns, are proposed.

- Following a request by the Commission, the current submission includes information on two exhibits in the museums that will interpret the Patent Office Building. A long-term exhibit on the building and its social and institutional history is installed on the upper story in the south wing, in the gallery adjacent to the original entrance doors. The exhibit is based on Temple of Invention: History of a National Landmark, by historian Charles J. Robertson, which is a well-illustrated and -written popular history of the building that is also offered for sale.
- A permanent exhibit on the historic building fabric of the Patent Office will be mounted in a small antechamber inside of the south entrance of the museum. A concept for the exhibit is included with the current submission. It proposes several large-format prints of historic photographs of the building, including two of the former courtyard landscape; a reproduction of the cast iron fountains as they were shown in the catalog from which they were ordered; and small sections of the fountains (to be determined).

The same number and arrangement of benches is proposed. Mechanical pylons, as previously shown, are proposed. The material palette was presented at the April 2006 meeting. The courtyard floor is composed of two types of black granite (Cold Spring Black and Mesabi Black), both with a sealed, thermal (flamed) finish. The planter/benches will be constructed of honed White Thassos marble. The steel grille around the perimeter of the courtyard has a polished dark finish to complement the granite pavement. The pylons have a shot-peened stainless steel finish. In contrast, the eight canopy columns are of an anodized aluminum in a pale amber color.

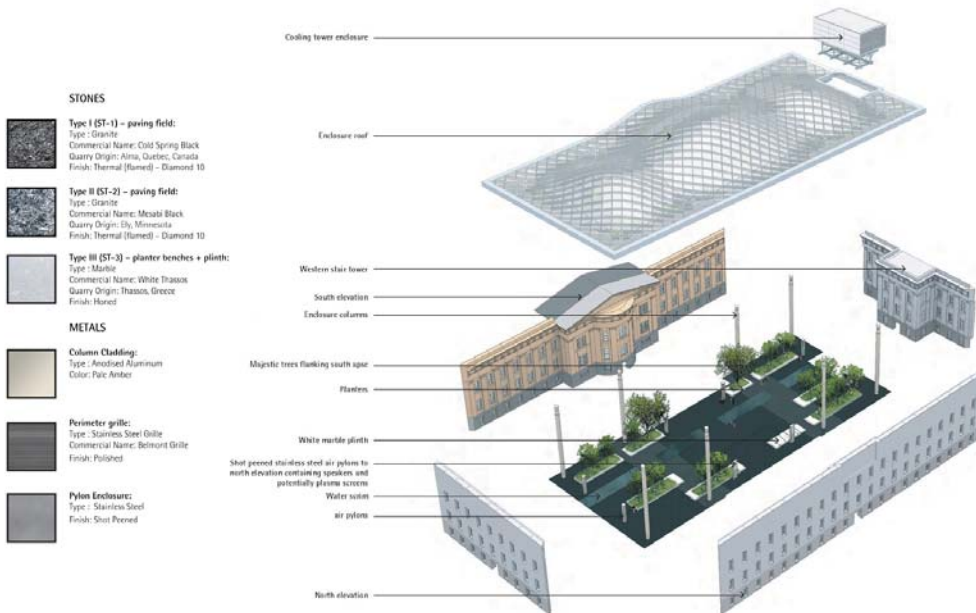


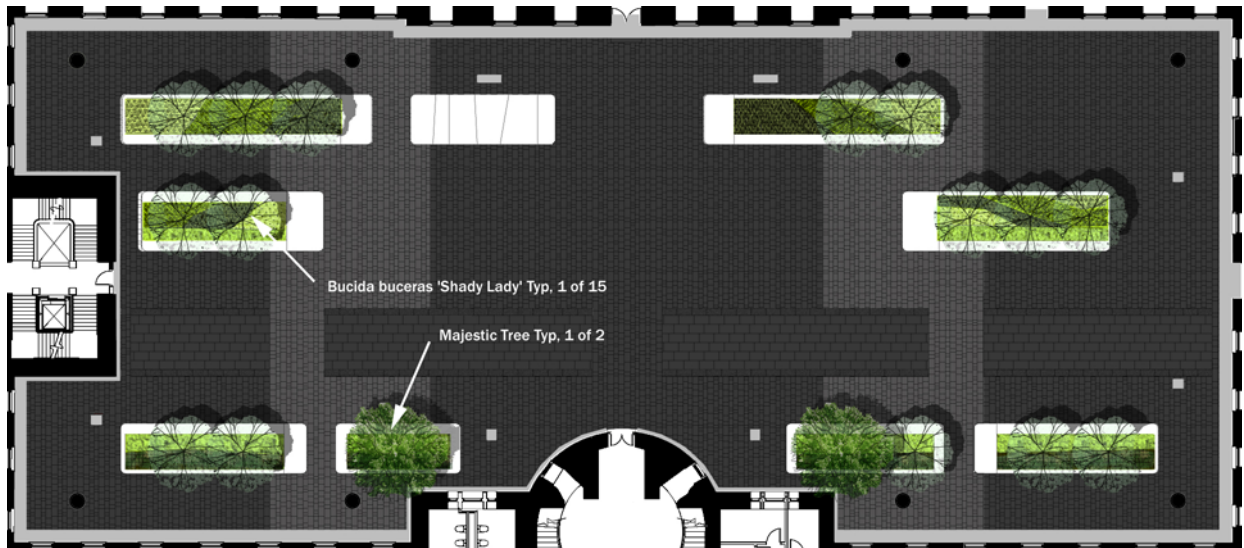
Final site development plans for courtyard landscape: catering benches removed; water scrim shortened slightly at ends and side grates for water circulation replaced with perforated granite pavers; overall floor pattern simplified and pavement stones laid in north-south linear pattern of varied dimensions; tree sub-canopy layer removed.



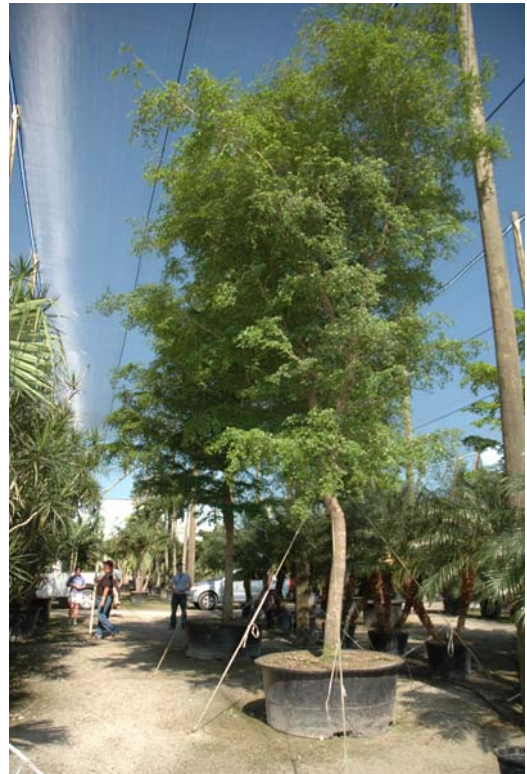
Water Scrim, detailed with perforated stone edges for water source and return.



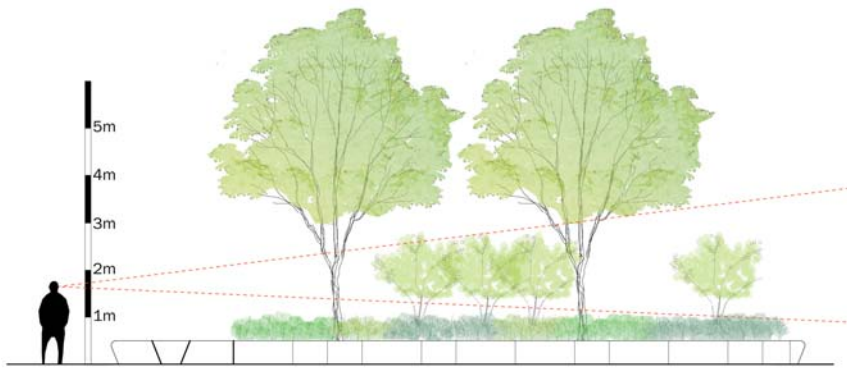




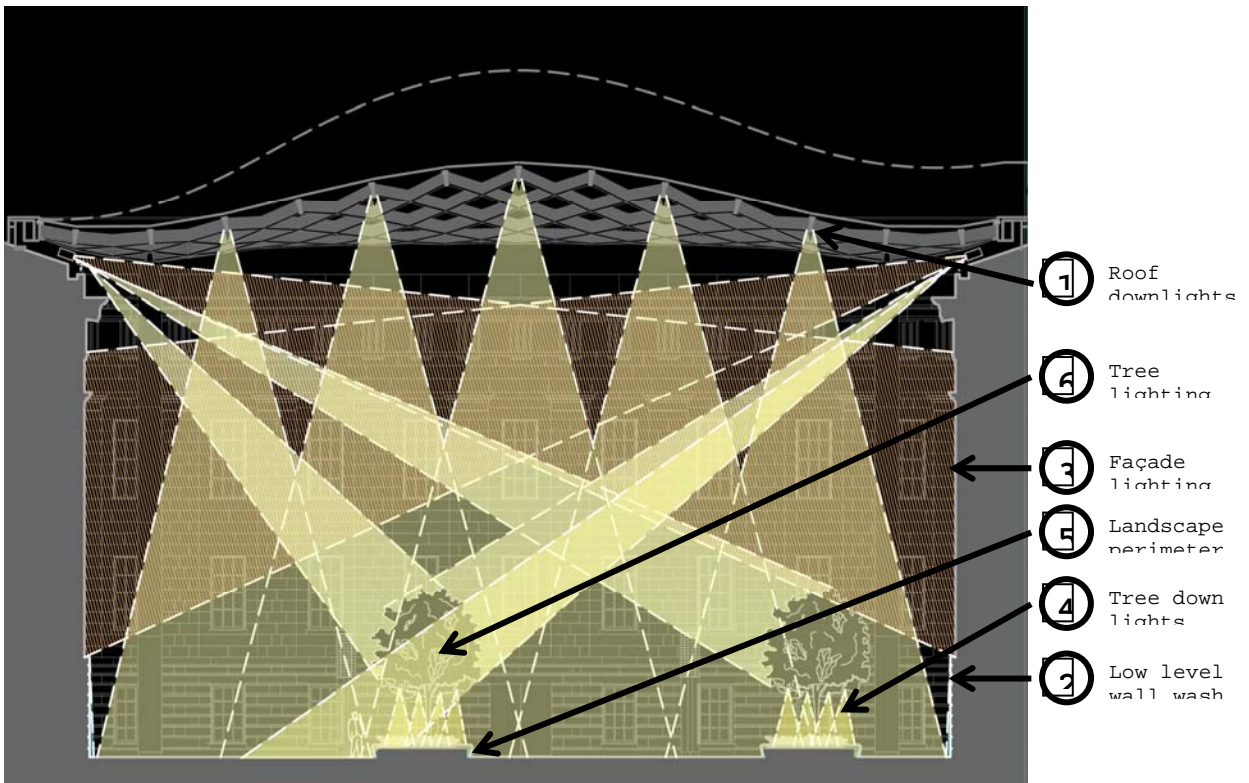
Majestic Trees (to either side of south courtyard door)



Canopy trees (in planters)



At top: Removal of the sub-canopy layer allows the courtyard facades to be seen more fully. Above: Examples of the proposed shrubbery layer. Below: Courtyard lighting plan, showing lighting of and from trees, and of facades.



- ① Roof downlights
- ② Tree lighting
- ③ Façade lighting
- ④ Landscape perimeter
- ⑤ Tree down lights
- ⑥ Low level wall wash

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Landscape Plan

The proposed landscape plan for the courtyard responds to the Commission Action at the April 2006 meeting and to Commissioners' comments at that and previous meetings. The Commission's primary objective in the past year has been to ensure that the courtyard be designed to appear and function as a public amenity for all visitors to this significant historic public building.

The water scrim has been softened to be a more complementary element within the historic courtyard facades. The removal of the catering benches reinforces the primary identity and function of the courtyard as a public amenity. The simplification and increased openness of the planting plan, especially the removal of the tree sub-canopy layer, allows for improved views across the courtyard of the courtyard facades. The water scrim will reflect the canopy and sky, and plantings will soften the broad extent of the granite floor and create vertical scale-giving elements in the courtyard. The design provides trees, plants, water, and natural light within the courtyard.

Fountains

The Secretary of the Smithsonian committed in writing to restoring to working order and reinstalling the two cast-iron fountains removed from the courtyard when it was demolished, and the Commission had accepted the reuse of the fountains as partial mitigation for the loss of the historic courtyard. Provided with further information about the condition of the fountains at its April 2006 meeting, the Commission asked the Smithsonian to provide sufficient information about how the fountains would be interpreted prior to the submission of final site development plans for the courtyard landscape to the Commission. The April 2006 action, in part, was:

(The Commission) 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 the permanent exhibit on the history of the building in a gallery inside the F Street entrance.

(The Commission) requires that, prior to final submission of the courtyard landscape, the Smithsonian develop a plan for the introduction and interpretation of the historic fountains in the museum exhibit and publications.

The disposition and interpretation of the fountains is the remaining outstanding mitigation measure of the Smithsonian's courtyard enclosure undertaking--a measure previously agreed to by both the Commission and the Smithsonian. While the staff appreciates the good start indicated by the exhibit concept submitted with the final courtyard landscape plan, it anticipates the further development of the exhibit in a timely manner, consultation with the staff, and the submission of the exhibit plan to the Commission for its review.

CONFORMANCE

Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

Relevant policies in the Preservation and Historic Features element include:

1. 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.
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*.
28. Protect the reservations that contain historic landscapes and features from incompatible changes or incursions.

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 and include the courtyard.

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 design as it related to historic and visual resources.

Staff's independent review finds that the EA conclusions and FONSI mitigation requirements remain valid and acceptably analyze the potential environmental impacts of the submitted plans, effectively responding to the mitigation conditions approved by the Commission in its approval of the courtyard canopy in September 2005.

National Historic Preservation Act

Although the Smithsonian Institution terminated Section 106 consultation in March 2005, NCPC continues to review the courtyard enclosure undertaking under its Section 106 responsibilities, including the terms of mitigation required by the Commission in its September 2005 approval of the courtyard enclosure and accepted by the Smithsonian Institution. Some of the mitigation was recommended by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) in its final comments to the Commission. The D.C. State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) also recommended mitigation measures. Staffs of both agencies have participated in consultation meetings with the Smithsonian Institution and its design team during the ongoing development of the courtyard landscape.

The outstanding mitigation measure from the courtyard enclosure undertaking is the disposition and interpretation of the cast iron fountains.

The reconstruction of the reservation landscape and of the F Street stairs are elements of a separate Section 106 undertaking for which the SHPO and ACHP and other parties are actively consulting as the plan is developed.

CONSULTATION

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed this item at its August 2005 meeting, with all agencies in attendance coordinating. The participating agencies were: NCPC, the District of Columbia's Office of Planning and Department of Housing and Community Development, the General Services Administration, and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

Commission of Fine Arts

The Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) reviewed the submission at its April and June 2006 meetings, approving the final plan at its June 15, 2006 meeting.