
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 23-03

National Museum of Natural History

10th Street and Constitution Avenue NW

Meeting Date: January 26, 2023
Applicant: Smithsonian Institution
Affected ANC: 2C

The Historic Preservation Office recommends the Board request the forwarding to the National Register of Historic Places the documentation for the National Museum of Natural History for listing the property under National Register Criteria A and C at the national level of significance for history and architecture, with a period of significance of 1911 to 1965. The museum was declared a District of Columbia landmark in 1964, and the present documentation supplements that designation.

Preservation Background

The National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) was named a historic landmark in 1964 by the Joint Committee on Landmarks and was included as a building contributing to the character of the National Mall Historic District in 1966 (amended in 2016). No National Register nomination was ever prepared before now. This nomination has been prepared and is sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution (SI) to implement an agreement with HPO arising from the renovation of the National Air & Space Museum. The nomination provides a deeply researched and well-written account of the history and architecture of the building and its thirteen-acre site, from its conception at the turn of the twentieth century as the “new” National Museum, through its construction and expansion over the decades including its most recent interior renovation. The nomination establishes and justifies a period of significance for the building from 1911, the date of completion of the original building to 1965, the completion of the east and west additions.

History and Architecture

The NMNH is located on the north side of the National Mall on-axis with 10th Street on the north and the iconic Smithsonian Institution Building (the “Castle”) on the south. Known at the time of its construction as the “new” National Museum, the building was the second purpose-built United States National Museum, established as part of the 1876 Centennial Exhibition to provide research, exhibition and storage space for the Smithsonian’s expanding natural history, history, art and culture collections. Begun in 1904 and completed in 1911, the original granite-clad building is executed in a Neoclassical style with strong Roman influence consisting of a central, south-facing Corinthian-columned pavilion capped by a low Roman dome atop a tall drum enclosing an interior rotunda. Original east, west and north wings to the central pavilion are connected by original L-shaped ranges enclosing two courtyards. Two wings to the east and west of the building, and stepped generously back from its facades, were added 1961-1965.



Aerial view looking southwest across the Mall showing the National Museum of Natural History after the addition of its wings, circa 1965. (Smithsonian Institution Archives)

The Smithsonian Institution was founded in 1846 through the bequest of British scientist James Smithson who left his estate “to the people of the United States” to establish an institution in his name for the “increase and diffusion of knowledge.” The first building to house the institution, the Smithsonian Castle, was designed by James Renwick Jr. and included a museum, a library, an art gallery, lecture halls, and laboratories, as well as residential quarters for the institution’s first secretary and Smithsonian naturalists. Display space, however, was limited, and curating exhibits for the public was not the priority of those early Smithsonian scientists. So, when Congress provided funding for the Smithsonian’s participation in the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia, it further required the construction of a building in Washington in which to display the Institution’s collections after the exhibition. This building, the United States National Museum (present-day Arts and Industries Building), was completed in 1881 to house and interpret these collections and was the first federally funded museum of natural history in the United States.

As the collections swelled over the years, the need for even more generous quarters grew. The Smithsonian undertook renovations to its museum, along with other design projects at the National Zoo, and in the process, developed a working relationship with the local architecture firm of Hornblower & Marshall. So, when Congress passed legislation for a “new” National Museum, the Smithsonian naturally turned to Hornblower & Marshall to design the building. In 1902, James Rush Marshall visited some of Europe’s greatest museums and, two years later, the firm presented its design scheme. The scheme—with its elaborate French Beaux Arts exterior including a tall central dome and vaulted entry—aroused controversy with Charles McKim and Daniel Burnham, the architect members of the McMillan Commission, who preferred a more subdued Roman-inspired exterior. McKim and Burnham refined Hornblower & Marshall’s design behind the scenes, contributing to a protracted design process, tension and controversy

that are detailed in the nomination. McKim and Burnham undertook their revisions knowing that the new museum would serve as a model for those to follow. As finalized, the building's south-facing portico was heavily altered; its low dome roof and Greek cross base were the work of McKim, while the Corinthian portico was Burnham's suggestion. McKim also refined the pavilions at the ends of the east and west wings to achieve a desirable proportional relationship. The remainder of the building was constructed according to Hornblower & Marshall's plans between 1904 and 1911, with some delays in delivery of the vast quantities of granite required.

Upon completion, the new National Museum gave the Smithsonian the opportunity to build its displays in more generous space. The three departments were allotted one of the new museum's wings—geology in the east wing, biology in the west, and anthropology in the north. The southern pavilion provided a grand rotunda and public entry hall. The first generation of exhibits in the new museum, designed by William Henry Holmes, consisted of a series of family tableaux of different cultures and eras in large wood and glass cases. The peoples portrayed were depicted in authentic clothing, going about daily activities of the period and place. These life-size displays became the standard for museums around the world.

During World War I, the museum was given up for war purposes, providing office space for the Bureau of War Risk. After the war, the Smithsonian's collections grew extensively. To address its perpetual problem of the lack of space, the Smithsonian called for the expansion of the museum. Although Congress approved an addition in 1930, the initial appropriation was limited to planning and not construction. The Great Depression stymied further requests, limiting work to the introduction of mezzanine levels within the tall space and renovation and stabilization projects. By then called the Natural History Museum, the building remained open during World War II, playing an important role in training the U.S. Army and Navy on the plant and animal life of Asia and the Pacific to aid in military survival. After the war, the Smithsonian backed a program of modernization that introduced contemporary ideas about exhibiting and interpreting cultural and scientific artifacts. The principal goal of the modernization program—better education—contributed to the museum's first overhaul of its exhibits and to the institution's renewed pursuit of funding for the long-delayed addition.

With Congressional appropriations of the 1960s, the Smithsonian finally undertook its long-sought expansion. Two symmetrical wings on the east and west ends of the original wings were completed in phases (east wing, 1961-1963 and west wing 1963-1965) to the design of Washington-based architects Mills, Petticord and Mills. Their Neoclassical design and the use of a matching stone contribute to their seamless integration, while their generous setbacks visually subordinate and distinguish them as additions. Later additions and alterations include, most notably, the enclosure of the east and west courts and the construction of the internal structures in the 1970s and 1990s.

Evaluation

The Museum of Natural History meets D.C. Designation Criteria A and B (Events and History) and National Register Criterion A at the national level of significance. Completed in 1911 as the Smithsonian's "new" National Museum, the museum has made profound contributions in its long history of developing and disseminating information about natural, cultural, ethnological and world history, and the fine arts, to an international audience through exhibits, research, collections, publications, and public programs.

The Museum of Natural History also meets D.C. Designation Criteria D, E and F (Architecture and Urbanism, Artistry and Creative Masters) and National Register Criterion C at the national level of significance. The building was one of the first buildings on the National Mall built according to the siting and design criteria established by the McMillan Plan. As designed and completed, it served as a precedent for the Neoclassical architecture envisioned for the National Mall as well as elsewhere in the federal core of the city.

The period of significance for the museum extends from 1911, when the original building was completed on the exterior and interior, to 1965, when the east and west pavilions—envisioned since the 1930s and planned in the late 1950s—were completed. These pavilions, which housed the Smithsonian’s Department of Geology, and the divisions of mollusks and birds, were integral to the educational and dissemination of scientific knowledge to the public.

Boundaries

The National Museum of Natural History is located on part of U.S. Reservation No. 3 on the National Mall. The museum site is bounded on the north by Constitution Avenue NW, on the south by Madison Drive NW, on the east by 9th Street NW and on the west by 12th Street NW.

