

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City



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December 12, 2016

Ms. Jennifer Hirsch
National Capital Planning Commission
401 9th St., NW
Washington, DC 20004

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Re: Section 106 review of Renwick Gallery signs

Dear Ms. Hirsch:

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City has four principle concerns related to the two Renwick Gallery signs now undergoing Section 106 review:

1. The signs were not included in the initial Sec. 106 review of the Renwick Gallery Renovation that was approved in 2013, the Smithsonian did not submit them for review when they were later added to the project.

In the haste to open the renovated Gallery, the Renwick (a National Historic Landmark) designed and fabricated the signs without going through the Section 106 process that is intended to ensure, among other things, that consultation takes place with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), the public, and other interested stakeholders on projects undertaken by federal entities to evaluate and mitigate potential impacts to historic resources. After-the fact consultation, by definition, is not meaningful consultation in that alternatives have been forgone, impacts already sustained, and funds already expended. Unless the option of total removal and restoration to pre installation conditions is on the table as a potential outcome, we are merely left to mitigate effects.

2. The Smithsonian is incorrectly evaluating effects.

The Gallery believes the fact that the signs are not attached to the building itself is sufficient in the evaluation of effects. Impacts to a National Historic Landmark, particularly one in such proximity to the White House and Lafayette Square, cannot be solely measured based upon the disturbance of bricks and mortar. Signage contributing to the appearance of the building, obscuring a building, providing graphic or lit elements, as well as changing the overall historic streetscape are part of the overall equation. One would not install a neon sign in front of Mt. Vernon without considering the effects on the surrounding setting, context and landscape. The Renwick should not be an exception.

3. Internally lit signs are a violation of the DC sign code.

The DC sign code prohibits this type of internally lit sign. Although the Smithsonian is not required to comply with DC codes, up until now, it has voluntarily done so. This departure from this established protocol is disappointing and permitting these signs would set a dangerous precedent in our Nation's Capital.

4. The two signs are inappropriate for the building.

The Renwick is a craft museum. The back-lit signs are very commercial in nature, are duplicative when positioned at right angles, and do not complement the landmark building. Rather, they detract from it. Furthermore, the signs are not consistent with Smithsonian practice in identifying its museums--no other Smithsonian museum has back-lit signs.

As a museum of American crafts, the Renwick has a certain responsibility to spotlight the best work of American artists. As the Smithsonian, they also have the responsibility of curating our history – including a National Historic Landmark that, upon completion, was known as the “American Louvre.” In this spirit, perhaps a way forward would be for the Smithsonian to hold a signage design competition based on criteria determined through a collaborative process with appropriate agencies. Such a sign could ultimately convey the nature and purpose of the Renwick, attract attention of passersby, and be in scale with the historic building and its surroundings.

We appreciate the opportunity to submit these comments.

Sincerely yours,



Erik Hein
Co-chair, Historic Preservation Subcommittee
The Committee of 100 on the Federal City

cc: Sharon Park, Smithsonian Institution parks@si.edu
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