

The Committee of 100

on the Federal City



Building on 100 Years of Planning Advocacy

Via Web Portal and US Mail

January 27, 2023

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar, Chair
Committee on Rules & Administration
Vice Chair, Joint Committee on the Library
United States Senate
425 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Founded 1923

Chair

Shelly Repp

Vice-Chair

Nancy MacWood

Secretary

Pat Tiller

Treasurer

Beth Purcell

Trustees

Carol Aten

Charlie Bien

Monte Edwards

Alma Gates

Stephen Hansen

Erik Hein

Aidan Jones

David Marlin

Laura Richards

Andrea Rosen

Lance Salonia

Marilyn Simon

Jim Smailes

Kirby Vining, *emeritus*

RE: Library of Congress, *Visitor Experience Master Plan* – Adverse Effects on Historic Interiors

Dear Senator Klobuchar:

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City writes with significant concern regarding the *Visitor Experience Master Plan* (VEMP) now launched at the Thomas Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress. As Vice-Chair of the Joint Committee on the Library, you understand the profound significance of the historic structure (including its glorious interiors) to the nation's capital, to the architectural heritage of the United States and to the American people. Aspects of the VEMP being advocated by the Librarian of Congress (Librarian) and the Architect of the Capitol (AOC), apparently propose inappropriate changes to three of our nation's most significant historic interiors.

First opened in 1897, the Smithmeyer, Pelz, and Casey-designed Beaux Arts structure was the pride of our nation from the “get-go.” Rivaling any building in the capitals of Europe, the remarkable structure signaled the arrival of the United States on the world stage in terms of architecture and public space. The Jefferson Building was designated a National Historic Landmark by the Secretary of the Interior in 1965, joining a list of America's most important heritage sites which includes such places as Mt. Vernon, the Alamo, and Independence Hall. The importance of these places to the American people cannot be overstated. Their careful and respectful preservation to the highest standards for future generations is paramount.

Based on what little information about the *Visitor Experience Master Plan* is available to the public and concerned professionals, it appears that certain elements of the VEMP will affect adversely three significant historic interiors designated “Restoration Zones” in the AOC Building Preservation Guide – Main Reading Room, the Great Hall, and the Lower-Level Entrance Lobby. The “Restoration Zone” designation (by the AOC's own policy) requires the highest level of conservation and protection. More troubling is the apparent intention of the Librarian and AOC to remove the reading room function out of the Jefferson Building to the Adams Building across the street – eliminating the very historic rationale/ function for which the great space was designed – rendering it a lifeless museum relic. We understand and applaud the 14th Librarian of Congress' intention to make the building more appealing to a new generation accustomed to more compelling media and museum

945 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001
www.committeeof100.net
info@committeeof100.net

experiences replete with high “production values.” However, we believe that it is achievable without affecting adversely this national treasure as appears to be the case in the current *Master Plan*.

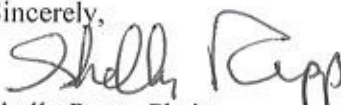
Candidly however, having said that, details of what is exactly proposed are sketchy and difficult to verify. As you know, the United States Capitol and its related buildings and grounds are not subject to the consultation and other provisions required in Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (Title 54 U.S.C. §30701). And while Congress’ rationale for such a stricture in the name of security and undue second guessing is understandable, changes to so important and beloved a historic building as the Jefferson Building requires disclosure and public/outside professional scrutiny whenever possible. Our (and other professional organizations’) efforts to understand more accurately what is proposed in the VEMP have largely been ignored.

As evidence, you will remember that the recent public controversy regarding the so-called “oculus” element of the *Master Plan* in the Main Reading Room was withdrawn after the concept was “leaked” and significant public pushback ensued. We understand that similar problematic elements remain proposed for the above cited interior spaces, based on scant information available to us. These historic spaces are too significant and have too deep a meaning to the American public for the work to proceed without public and outside professional scrutiny, knowledge, and assent.

We respectfully request the Joint Committee’s intervention to ensure the highest possible standard of renovation/ rehabilitation in this landmark building. Please accept a proposal from The Committee of 100 for the Joint Committee’s calling an ad hoc Blue Ribbon advisory group of subject experts reporting directly to you. Our recommendation would include, at a minimum, The American Institute of Architects (Historic Resources Subcommittee), the Commission of Fine Arts, Society of Architectural Historians, and the American Institute for Conservation among others knowledgeable about the issues. The public interest in the Jefferson Building is exceedingly important.

Please feel free to contact the Committee if you have any questions or require additional information. We honor your interest in the Library of Congress and know you treasure it as much as the citizens of the Nation’s Capital do.

Sincerely,


Shelly Repp, Chair
Committee of 100 on the Federal City

About the Committee of 100: Celebrating our 100th anniversary in 2023, *The Committee of 100 on the Federal City* is a nonprofit organization dedicated to safeguarding and advancing Washington’s historic distinction, natural beauty, and overall livability. Volunteer members contribute expertise and civic action in the service of responsible planning in Washington, DC.

CC: •Marcel Acosta, Director, National Capital Planning Commission marcel.acosta@ncpc.gov
•Thomas Luebke, FAIA, Secretary, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts tluebke@cfa.gov
•Catherine Townsend, President & CEO, Trust for the National Mall
information@nationalmall.org
•Matt Flis, AICP, Senior Urban Designer, National Capital Planning Commission
matthew.flis@ncpc.gov
•Judy Scott Feldman, President, National Mall Coalition jfeldman@nationalmallcoalition.org
•Rebecca Miller, Executive Director, DC Preservation League rebecca@dcpreservation.org
•David Maloney, DC State Historic Preservation Officer David.Maloney@dc.gov
•Philip Kennicott, Washington Post philip.kennicott@washpost.com
•Cathleen McGuigan, Editor-in-Chief, *Architectural Record* mguiganc@bnpmedia.com
•Bryan Clark Green, PhD, Preservation Officer, Society of Architectural Historians
bryancgreen@gmail.com