

U.S. COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS

ESTABLISHED BY CONGRESS 17 MAY 1910

NATIONAL BUILDING MUSEUM
401 F STREET, N.W., SUITE 312
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20001-2728

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10 February 2005

Dear Mr. Rombach:

The Commission of Fine Arts reviewed, during its 25 January 2005 meeting, the concept submission for the reconstruction of the south stairs on the historic Old Patent Office Building that houses the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery and American Art Museum. By unanimous agreement, the Commission did not approve the submission. The members felt that reconstructing the stairs to approximate the 1873 configuration as mitigation for the enclosure of the courtyard was unwarranted and inappropriate, considering that the building's primary period of architectural significance included the original straight run of steps installed in 1836.

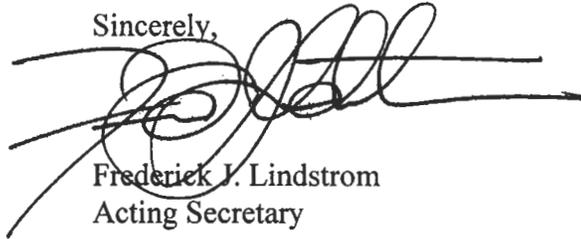
Adding to the member's objections to the proposed scheme was the fact that the museum's main entrance would be through three new doorways opening directly at street level, which would have to be cut into what should be – and was – a solid wall below the lower central landing – a significant new modification to the stair's 1873 configuration. To further compound these objections, the proposal did not include provisions to reopen the original historic entrance in the portico for public use. The result would be stairs leading to nowhere and confusion for the museum's visitors when they ascend the steps and cannot enter the building.

In addition, to make room for the reconstructed 1873 stairs the existing sidewalk would have to be widened and a traffic lane removed from F Street compromising and altering the city's historic street grid. When all these less than ideal items are added together, this project just does not make sense and would be an unnecessary large expenditure with little if any return in value to the museums or to the historic fabric of the building. The Commission recommends the current configuration of the portico and entranceway be retained, unmodified and unaltered. It should be left as is.

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Perhaps if mitigation is called for to counter the effects of enclosing the building's courtyard, then other strategies should be investigated in which a sound preservation project is the result.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'F. Lindstrom', written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Frederick J. Lindstrom
Acting Secretary

Mr. Harry Rombach
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cc: Marc Pachter, Director, Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery
Deborah Nauta-Rodriguez, Smithsonian Project Executive
Mary Kay Lanzillotta, AIA, Hartman-Cox Architects