

Smithsonian Scales Back \$2 Billion Expansion Plan

The organization announced that it would abandon elements of its ambitious redesign, opting for a more modest approach.



By Sarah Bahr

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The Smithsonian’s eye-popping \$2 billion expansion plan was supposed to propel the institution into the 21st century.

Complete with an ambitious expansion of its 19th-century red administration building, the Castle, that would have added dining, retail and restrooms, and new National Mall-facing entrances to the National Museum of African Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, the concept designs for its south campus were unveiled with great fanfare in 2014. The first phase, which included repairs to the exterior of the Hirshhorn Museum, was already underway.

But on Wednesday, the organization said its master plan would no longer include any of those elements, and had instead been revised to focus on restorations to the interior and exterior of the Castle, and interior and underground improvements to the Arts and Industries Building, which has been largely closed since 2004 for renovations.

Ann Trowbridge, the Smithsonian’s associate director for planning, said preserving the buildings had been the redesign’s focus from the beginning. “The key aspects of the master plan with respect to the Castle, A.I.B. and the Hirshhorn have always focused on restoration and renovation of their historic fabric,” she said. “And that continues to be the priority.”

Designed by the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels, the original blueprint would have dramatically reshaped the 17 acres surrounding the Castle into a visitor gateway over the next 20 to 30 years, with construction set to begin this year. It would have relocated the loading dock to expand the garden behind the Castle and added a shock-absorbing dish below the building for seismic protection. (Carly Bond, a historic preservation specialist at the Smithsonian, said a proposed seismic-base isolation system would still provide earthquake protection.)

The scaled-back plan, which was presented publicly for the first time Wednesday afternoon to a virtual audience of community leaders, focuses on the renovation and restoration of two National Historic Landmarks: the Castle, designed by James Renwick Jr. and completed in 1855, and the Arts and Industries Building, designed by Adolf Cluss and Paul Schulze and built in 1881. Also included is a new central underground utility plant that will serve several of the buildings, including the Castle and the Arts and Industries Building. The plan will be presented to the National Capital Planning Commission on Thursday.



A proposed view of the Castle's basement in the plan that has now been scaled back. via Smithsonian Institution

Lonnie G. Bunch III, who became the Smithsonian Institution's first African-American secretary when he took over in 2019, told *The Washington Post* on Monday that the changes to the master plan were "simply the evolutionary process" that resulted from him "coming in and asking certain questions." He said he had delegated the implementation to Kevin Gover, the acting under secretary for museums and culture.

The Smithsonian spent \$5.5 million on architecture and research fees for the master plan unveiled in 2014. Reacting to that proposal, some people lamented the loss of the peaceful Enid A. Haupt Garden, though the Smithsonian later announced it would be retained, while others worried the earthquake protection measures and underground expansion of the Castle would pose a risk to the building.

Linda St. Thomas, the chief spokeswoman for the Smithsonian, said in an interview on Tuesday that the master plan, which was approved by the National Capital Planning Commission in 2018, was simply a vision for the campus's next few decades. "We know there will be changes to the projects as they come up for approval and individual public review," she said.

But the Smithsonian's finances have taken a hit during the pandemic. The institute lost \$49 million between March and September from coronavirus-related closures, and it jettisoned plans to open its first overseas exhibition space in London in partnership with the Victoria and Albert Museum in September. Since the revised plan for the Castle and the Arts and Industries Building focuses on essential upgrades like electrical and plumbing systems and a new roof and windows, it will be funded primarily by Congress, *The Post* first reported. The updated cost has not been disclosed.

The Smithsonian is currently completing the first project under the master plan, a renovation of the Hirshhorn Museum's exterior and, soon, the sculpture garden. Construction on the Castle and the Arts and Industries Building is expected to begin in 2023, St. Thomas said, and is expected to take at least five years. (The Castle's last major renovation was completed in 1968.) The third project, the removal and then restoration of the Enid A. Haupt Garden to replace the roof of the building beneath it, is not expected to begin until 2029.

Several new museums may also soon join the campus: a National Museum of the American Latino and a national women's history museum, both of which were recently approved by Congress as part of its year-end spending bill. St. Thomas said the Arts and Industries Building was being considered to house the Museum of the American Latino, but that a site had not yet been selected.