

VENTURI, SCOTT BROWN AND ASSOCIATES, INC.

4236 MAIN STREET, PHILADELPHIA, PA 19127-1696

TEL: 215 487-0400 FAX: 215 487-2520 WWW.VSBA.COM

Robert Venturi FAIA, Int. FRIBA
Denise Scott Brown RIBA, Int. FRIBA
Daniel McCoubrey AIA, LEED®AP
Nancy Rogo Trainer AIA, AICP, LEED®AP
Heather Clark AIA, LEED®AP
Seth Cohen LEED®AP
Joel Donlon AIA, LEED®AP
John Izenour

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March 16, 2010

Cynthia MacLeod, Superintendent
Independence National Historic Park
143 South 3rd Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106

Dear Cynthia,

We are very happy to have been given the opportunity to comment on the proposed design for the entrance to the museum at Franklin Court and are grateful for your thoughtful response to our comments. As an overview of our discussion, we have set down some questions and comments that we brought up at our meeting:

We are concerned that the new entrance pavilion will not meet the requirements for sturdiness of a national institution that is visited by large crowds and tuned to school children arriving in busloads, 60 people per bus.

The considerable changes at the entry to this busy institution reflect programming changes at the Museum 35 years after it opened, and rightly so – this is a different era. But the proposed access and entrance plan does not seem to us to allow for the likely visitor volumes and flows on busy days, or to provide sufficient and well located waiting and marshalling space for school groups.

Nor does there seem to be sufficient covered waiting space on the outdoor Court beside the main entrance. The places provided there do not connect well with the entrance. A single large area directly adjacent to the entrance may work better than two small ones. The continuous seating that originally lined the brick wall has had to be reduced to augment the entrance doorways. But this has reduced the footage of comfortable

waiting space offered and the sense of scale provided by the unbroken line of benches.

The pavilion's abstract Neomodern aesthetic seems confusingly close in character to the Ghost structure and out of keeping with the mellow brick, stone and wood of the site elements. Would appropriately kid friendly materials and details (i.e. masonry and sturdy door and window framing) help the pavilion become more a part of the entourage? Consider giving it some subtle (not PoMo) reference to the 18th century – perhaps by the use of color or by making it seem somewhat more porch or pergola-like. Ironically, the pavilion might fit more comfortably within the Court if its metal posts were gutsier and colored to harmonize with the brick of the Museum building.

The cantilevered structural canopy elements are aggressive in relation to other elements in the Court. The glass panes supported below and between the structural elements will require frequent maintenance and constitutes an attractive hazard. They would belong more happily in an elegant private hotel than in Benjamin Franklin's very public home.

This is not to discount the advantages of transparency in making visible the exciting elements of the inside. These, perhaps more than the architecture, will draw visitors inside. But we would like to see the lobby area itself, not only the store windows, serving a much stronger communicative function. This can be achieved only within limits given the restrictions of space. Nevertheless, we feel more can be done within the limits. And the walls of the lobby and stairways can also communicate via their colors and by the addition of signs and hangings.

As a more general comment, we can point out that we went to lengths in the original design to extend Bacon's Greenway plan for Society Hill through the site, and to maintain a public way and presence in it separate from the Museum – to ensure that the Court would remain part of the public tissue of pedestrian Philadelphia. This tissue is complex and it grows in vitality to the extent it penetrates inside buildings, establishing valid relationships between pedestrians' chosen paths and the interior public spaces of all buildings, from the living rooms of private houses, linked to sidewalks by their front doors, to the major

auditoria or meeting rooms of great and small institutions, Franklin's included.

In essence, we take the public way, the pedestrian route, and extend it into and through the building, making it thereby a processional that goes unbroken from the outside inside, from the city to the building. This will support and enliven the Museum by allowing crowds on well used routes to visit it, and making them want to do so.

However, in the new entry plans as they now stand, the sequence is broken. There is no street through the building. The processional ends anticlimactically at the entry to the building. The ramp felt like a Colonial road, possibly descending to the Delaware. Fair enough that it had to go, but the tight spaces as you walk in and the standard staircase before your feet make it seem as if you enter Ben's house and fall immediately down his basement stair. This and the metal and butt-glazing of the interior give little prospect of achieving a substitute processional. Yet more expansive and welcoming entry halls have been achieved by Modern masters in limited conditions elsewhere (Alvar Aalto as an example).

We suggest the architects investigate ways to achieve a new processional in the sequence from court to entry to stairs to museum. They might consider making the flights of the major stairway of different lengths, with the first flight being shorter, to give more assembling space upstairs, and aligning it with the exterior glass wall.

We hope these comments that you have sought from us will help the changes augment Ben's dream for his place. We are so very happy you have invited our contribution at an early stage, so that we will be able to give our assent joyfully to proposed changes in the future -- something we cannot do today.

Very sincerely and with best wishes,



Robert Venturi

Denise Scott Brown

RV/DSB:jg