

Smithsonian Institution

Arts and Industries Building, Washington, District of Columbia
Smithsonian Castle

Role: Museum Planner for Historic Museums

Program: Art and history exhibits, collections storage, lobbies, cafes, gift shops, function spaces, classrooms, exhibit support, and offices

Building Areas (combined): 360,000 sf

Status: Museum Planning completed in 1985. Subsequently we completed a detailed museum planning study in 2003 to analyze using the A&I building as a potential new home for the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Description: VernerJohnson was hired by the Smithsonian Institution to embark upon a complex planning and conceptual design project that involved development of a space program for virtually all of the Smithsonian's administrative areas housed in the Castle, the Arts and Industries Building, and in leased space off the Washington Mall. This work also included development of Conceptual Use Plans for interior renovation of both the Castle and Arts and Industries Building.

A critically important part of this planning effort was to maximize space use efficiency in both buildings while also preserving the architectural integrity of the two historic structures: the Castle is the original Smithsonian Institution building on the Washington Mall, and the Arts and Industries Building was our first National Museum. Another important objective of the study was to develop a plan that would provide a strong public program presence in both buildings without seriously compromising the capacity of both buildings to house extensive administrative office space.

The long range restoration plan called for all four of the building's major courts to be opened up to the skylights, and the ground level of each court to become public space. The walls separating the four courts from the four axial exhibit halls were planned to be restored to their original condition and the original series of large open arches to be opened up, allowing for a free flow of visitors through all the courts and exhibition halls. This device was planned to recapture the open nature and original architectural character of the building. Opening the four courts to the skylights has resulted in a tremendous infusion of natural light. This has benefited not only the visiting public, but also the Smithsonian staff housed within the building. The plan envisioned that offices surrounding the courts on the second level would have views down into the public areas and up to the skylight above, greatly increasing the number of offices with access to natural light and pleasing views.

