

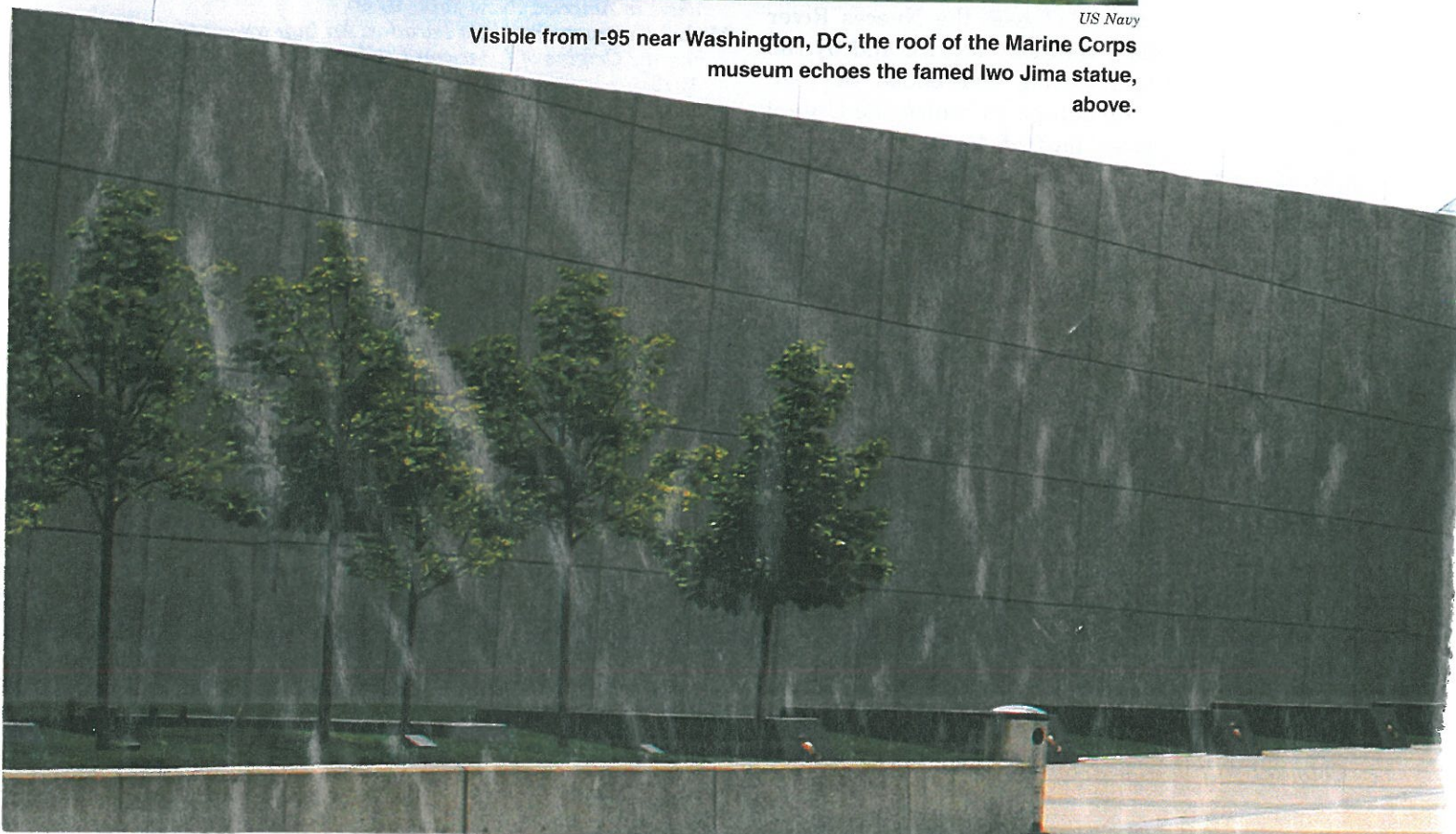
RETHINKING THE HISTORY MUSEUM

BY W. BARKSDALE MAYNARD

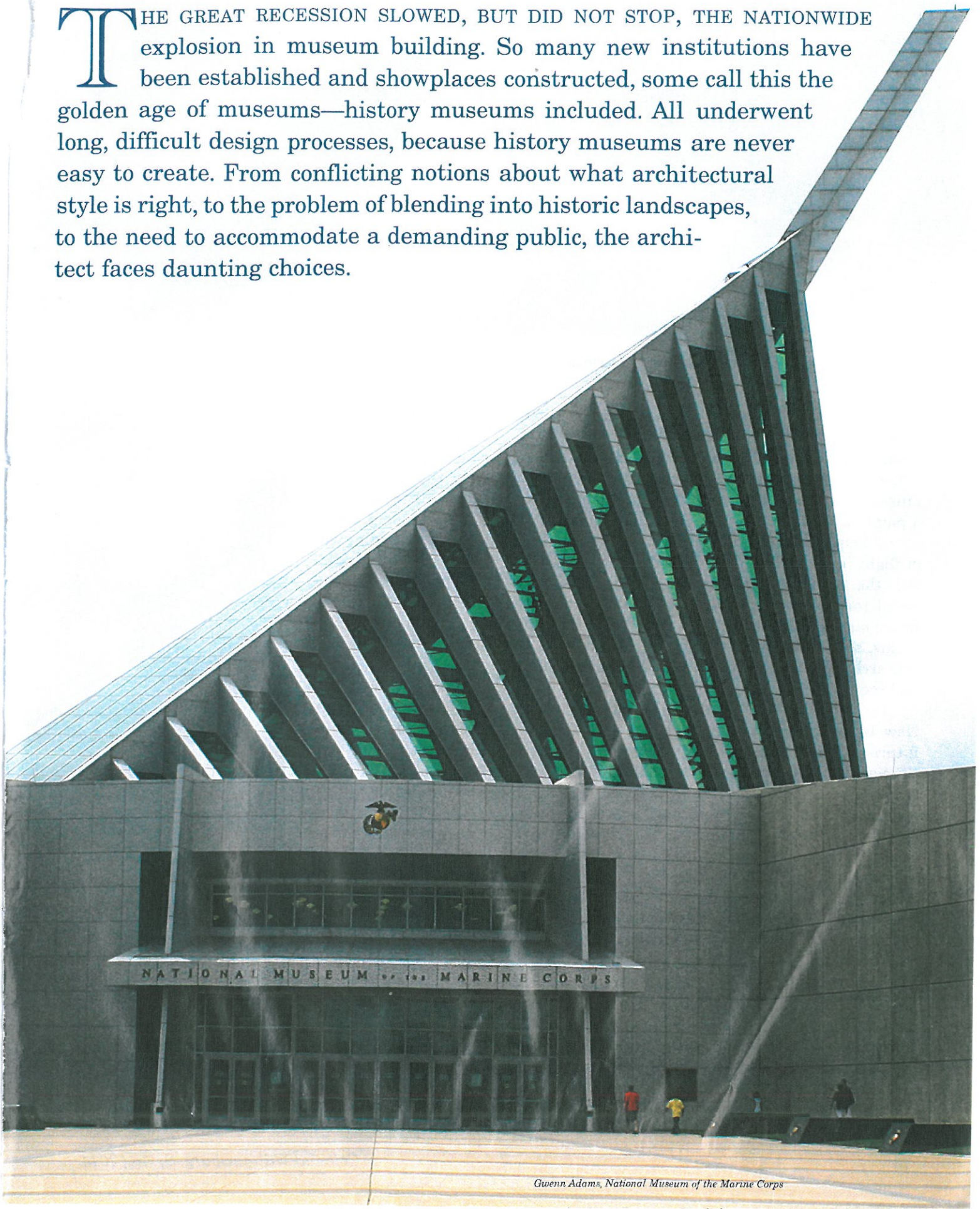


US Navy

Visible from I-95 near Washington, DC, the roof of the Marine Corps museum echoes the famed Iwo Jima statue, above.



THE GREAT RECESSION SLOWED, BUT DID NOT STOP, THE NATIONWIDE explosion in museum building. So many new institutions have been established and showplaces constructed, some call this the golden age of museums—history museums included. All underwent long, difficult design processes, because history museums are never easy to create. From conflicting notions about what architectural style is right, to the problem of blending into historic landscapes, to the need to accommodate a demanding public, the architect faces daunting choices.



Gwenn Adams, National Museum of the Marine Corps



Courtesy North Carolina History Museum

The North Carolina History Museum's traditional look emphasizes the collection over a design that calls attention to itself.

Often the first dilemma is whether the architectural style should be contemporary or traditional. Some architects want to put their stamp on a design using contemporary forms and materials, even when museum staff wish they wouldn't. "Just try hanging a painting on a curving wall," curators say. In 2003, at the Smithsonian's Udvar-Hazy Center, a museum of flight in Chantilly, Virginia, outside Washington, DC, the architects included a soaring glass-and-metal tower in their design. "And then we had to figure out what to do with that tower" and its many rooms, says former program manager Lin Ezell. It was architecturally exciting but nothing the curators had requested.

For 2010's North Carolina History Center at New Bern, architects were told to avoid "the very futuristic," says deputy director Philippe Lafargue. Similarly, the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum and Visitor Center of 2008 is traditional, a decision made at the beginning, says York, Pennsylvania, architect Rob Kinsley. The National Park Service "wanted a building that sort of faded away and settles into the landscape. They were nervous about hiring an architect, because many of them try to place their signature on a museum."

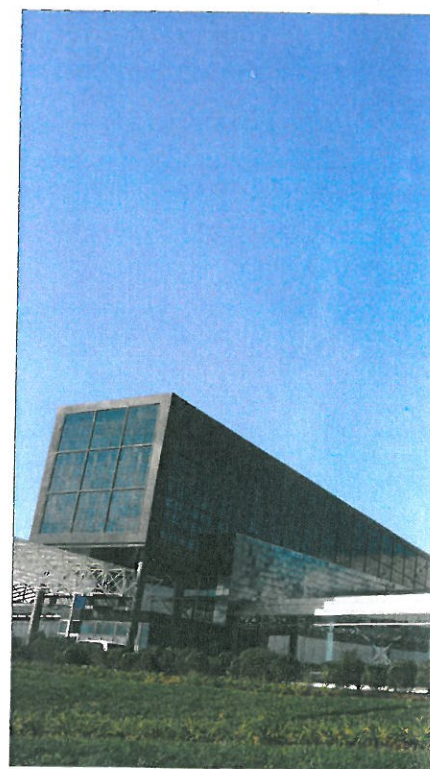
All museums are eager to attract crowds, so the proliferation of traditional designs may have something to do with the public preference for the familiar. Ezell now directs the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Quantico, Virginia, which opened in 2006. She says, "We are very much part of the fabric of the community. A very abstract building might not have lived as well with what's around us."

At Virginia's Nathalie P. and Alan M. Voor-

hees Archaearium at Historic Jamestowne, which also opened in 2006, the flavor is modern, with copper-clad walls wrapping a steel skeleton. "Building with steel allowed flexibility," says Williamsburg architect Carlton Abbott. The structure stands on pilings above a seventeenth-century graveyard and the foundations of row houses that served for Virginia's third and fourth statehouses. The architect gained extra exhibition space by cantilevering floors outward with steel beams.

The design team decided against a traditional style or a statehouse reconstruction. "It should be easy to tell what's new and what's old," says architect Ed Pillsbury of Richmond, Virginia, who worked closely with Abbott. "Sometimes the best way to respect the past may not be to re-create it, but to create a thing of our own time."

Other museums blend traditional and the up-to-date. Maya Lin of New York City, designer of



The Smithsonian's Udvar-Hazy Center featuring a striking in appearance but requiring thoi



Colonial Williamsburg

The glass walls of Jamestown's Voorhees Archaearium, atop a seventeenth-century graveyard, offer a view toward the fort.



Wikimedia

ures a steel-and-glass tower in front, nt for museum exhibitions planning.

Washington's Vietnam Memorial, in 2009 created the Museum of Chinese in America inside a former Manhattan machine-repair shop. "We have juxtaposed old and new," she says. Venerable bricks and timbers contrast with a current style that is "cleaner, simpler, metal clad," to show a "combination of our past and our present."

Whatever the style, many museums strive to harmonize with their surroundings. The Museum of the Confederacy—Appomattox, designed by Abbott and opened in 2012, sports a metal roof and brick walls derived from the local Virginia vernacular.

At the North Carolina History Center in New Bern, Quinn Evans Architects was instructed to study and reinterpret nearby industrial buildings. They borrowed a brick color from the 1824 Christ Church in town.

Upcoming is a \$40 million expansion of The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg, a synthesis of the 1985 DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum

and the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum. New York architect Sam Anderson has tried to create a design "consonant with the architectural detailing of the original period—but not trying to pretend to be a colonial building."

CURATORS DESCRIBE THEIR IDEAL MUSEUM AS a black box: windowless interiors where exhibits can be effortlessly rearranged and lighting can be precisely controlled, free from glare and the fading effect sunlight has on organic materials. For the architect, the black box is a headache: how to give exterior elevations panache when the building lacks windows?

One senses a tug-of-war between architects and curators on this subject of windows. At Gettysburg, Kinsley says, curators relented and allowed a few windows to be punched into the black box: "We wanted relief valves to allow people to take a quiet moment to look at the landscape."

At Colonial Williamsburg, a goal of the Art Museums' improvements is the reduction of overhead light. "Skylights are the bane of our existence," says chief curator and vice president Ron Hurst. The original facility "had no windows whatsoever," Anderson says. "It was the curator's dream come true." Nevertheless, they have agreed to some in the expansion. "With the occasional window, it's nice to have a moment to let your mind rejuvenate," Anderson says.

The Archaearium's escape from the black box seems daring: a wall of glass allows visitors to examine artifacts not susceptible to light damage and to gaze across a grassy swale or upon the James River. "Through the glass you get the connection to



The National Museum of the Civil War Soldier in Petersburg, Virginia, incorporates classical elements into a modern design. *Courtesy National Museum of the Civil War Soldier*

the site,” Abbott says. “You can look out and see James Fort in the distance.”

New technologies may solve the black-box problem. At the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, being built on the National Mall in Washington, DC, for \$500 million—that’s enough for 102 Archaeariums—exterior walls are being clad in metal sheets with computer-designed perforations that admit variable amounts of light. Here is a windowless building that nonetheless lets the sun in, as through the sides of a colander, and the light is calibrated to suit each room’s needs. The pattern for the perforations is abstracted from decorative antebellum ironwork in New Orleans and Charleston, fabricated, perhaps, by slaves.



A “display case” to attract visitors—the front of the Tampa Bay History Center *Courtesy Tampa Bay History Center*

A PART FROM style and design, architects must consider the new relationship between museums and the public. Museums once stood aloof, assuming citizens would visit for self-betterment. Not anymore. Today’s institutions fight for our attention in a crowded enter-

tainment landscape. They have rebranded themselves as places not of highfalutin erudition but of ceaseless fun.

In 1999, architect Jonathan Kharfen of Boston designed the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier at the high-tech, hands-on Pamplin Historical Park in Petersburg, Virginia. Ten years later, in Florida, he executed the Tampa Bay History Center. Its motto: “Exactly what you didn’t expect.” No stodgi-



Colonial Williamsburg

Artist's drawing of the expansion of the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg, which assimilates the Historic Area's look.

ness allowed. The design of this glass-fronted facility is meant to connote entertainment, Kharfen says. "The whole front of the building is almost a display case. In the evening you can see illuminated Tampa Bay icons—images of Flamenco dancers, a pirate ship—to engage you right away before you even get inside."

Rather than assume the public will beat a path to their doors, twenty-first-century museums attempt to lure people in, Kharfen says, "to make it engaging and to have a contemporary sense of civicness—open to all." His contemporary design makes subtle reference to local history, he says. The building's form comprises three glass boxes, the colors of which—bronze, green, and blue—suggest "that Tampa is where people have met the land and the sea," the hues representing each in turn.

Ezell says the Marine Corps museum's "building is our best billboard"—rising on a site chosen for vis-



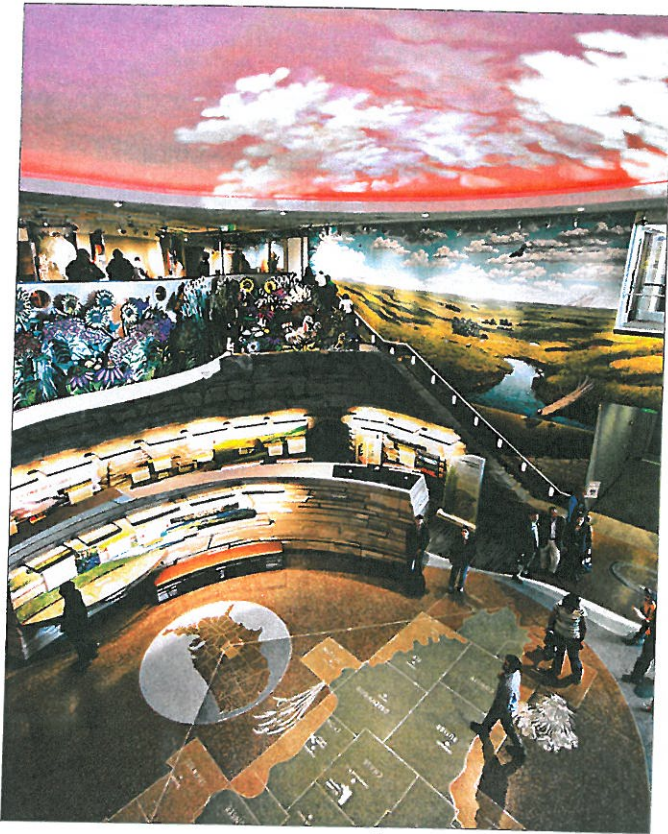
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Lin Ezell, of the Marine Corps museum in Quantico

ibility from Interstate 95 and crowned by an angled, 210-foot, stainless-steel spire, illuminated at night. It calls to mind the pole Marines used to raise the American flag on Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi. Winner of a national competition, Denver architect Curtis Fentress, who also did Denver's airport, kept the driver's experience firmly in mind. "You go by and you say, 'Wow, what is that?' It lures you in. Today we are in a digital age, and you have to be exciting."

For museum architects of, say, half a century ago,

the job of design was comparatively simple: a handsome lobby, exhibition rooms, maybe a cafeteria. Museums have been reconceived as community centers and engines of economic development. They host children's workshops, wedding rehearsals, yoga classes, and more. Pleasures abound, in the hope of enticing travelers to spend the night locally, the Holy Grail for tourist bureaus. "We try to provide many amenities," Ezell says, "to keep families on our campus."



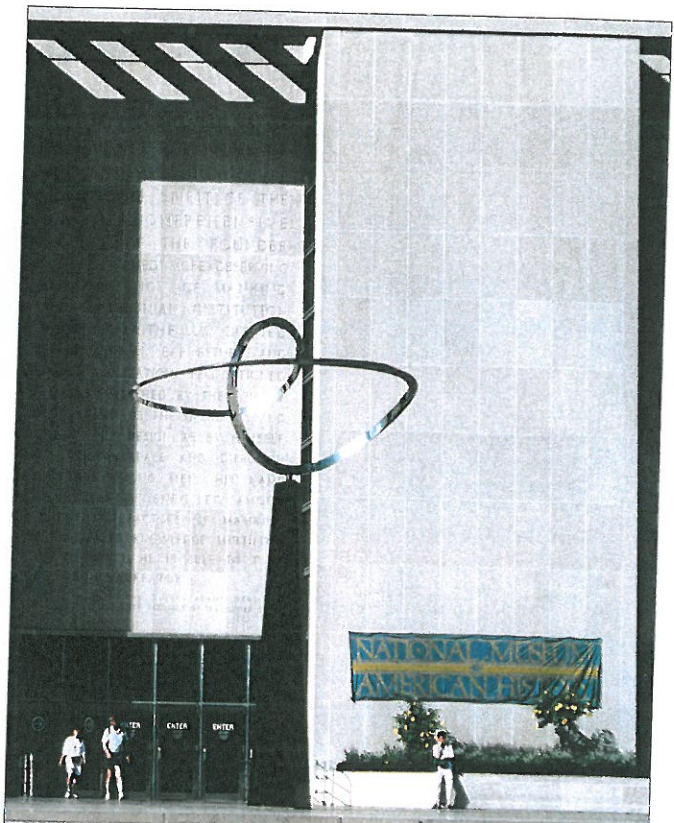
Courtesy Flint Hills Discovery Center

The grand staircase at Kansas's Flint Hills Discovery Center

The size of the Gettysburg Museum, with 22,000 square feet of exhibit space, is meant to encourage multiday visits in a region where the day trip is the rule. “We tried to give enough reasons to stay longer,” Kinsley says. “We have to be honest about it: we are designing attractions.”

Increasingly, lobbies double as entertainment venues. At the Marine Corps Museum, tableaux of battling Leathernecks can be wheeled aside to make room for revelers. At the 2012 opening bash for his Flint Hills Discovery Center in Manhattan, Kansas, Kharfen was delighted to find that “it’s a great party space.” At some museums, terraces accommodate bands, and grand staircases are included for weddings and the bride’s glittering descent. Architects incorporate separate loading docks for caterers, and rooms for storage of liquor and flowers.

Signaling “welcome” seems the overriding intention of museums today. At the African American Museum, a canopy-like overhang is to face the mall. It alludes to the inviting porch of the traditional southern home, says Durham, North Carolina, architect Phil Freelon. He’s one of the consortium of Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup, which won an international competition for the commission. “It’s a welcoming gesture, the threshold that provides shade and a place of



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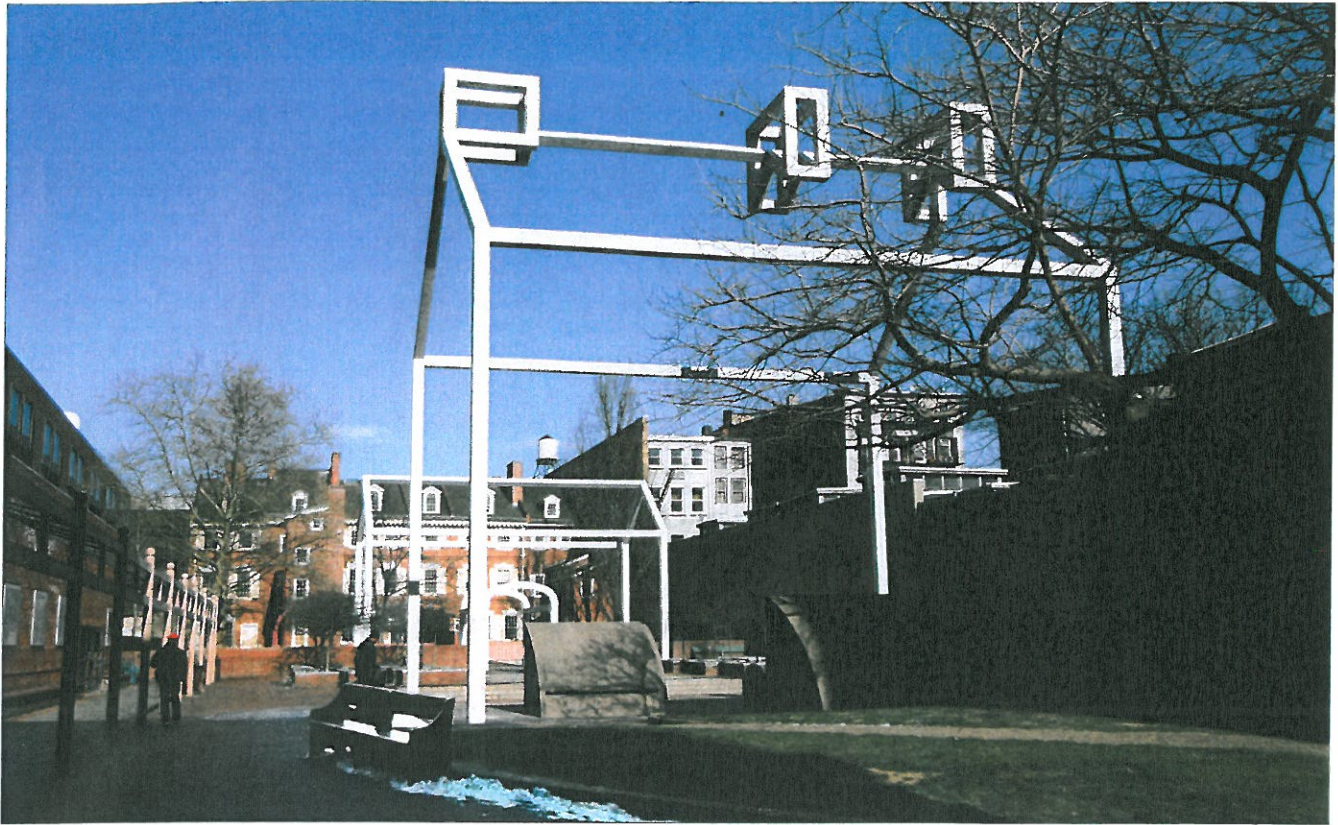
The redesigned National Museum of American History

respite on the southern side of the building,” he says.

Next door at the National Museum of American History, the granddaddy of history museums—where visitation can hit 80,000 daily—the 1964 interiors have been redesigned and the lobby made more spacious. “It didn’t make sense, and it didn’t flow right,” says Art Molella, director of its Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation. “The entrances were dark, and the public spaces were not well conceived.”

An urge to make the entrance more obvious led to the reconstruction of Philadelphia’s Franklin Court museum, which reopened in 2013 as the Benjamin Franklin Museum, and not without controversy. Philadelphians Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, pioneers of architectural postmodernism, created the original facility in 1976. Where Franklin lived during the Continental Congress and Constitutional Convention, they created a skeletal, steel-framework ghost house rising above the subterranean museum. There had been complaints about the obscure entrance to the underground attraction, an unobtrusive doorway in a long, colonial-style brick wall.

Washington architect Carl Elefante redesigned the entrance, replacing the wall with a glass box that houses a brightly lit stair. Scott Brown says the



National Park Service

A rethinking of the 1976 design, its ghost houses seen here, created a new entrance to the underground Franklin Museum.

redesigned entrance competes for attention with the ghost house. “Bob’s design was of a colonial garden and early romantic landscape,” she says, with a quiet entrance “like a gatehouse to an estate. But they’ve made it like a piece of neomodernism.”

Elefante says his twenty-first-century reconception benefits from the experience of “forty years of visitor center design. It’s a very different world today, with different expectations of how visitors can orient themselves.” Clear wayfinding is given priority now. “We took the brick wall and made it not opaque, not unwelcoming, but of glass—penetrable, transparent, inviting.”

Colonial Williamsburg is giving a decades’ old museum, designed by Kevin Roche of New Haven, Connecticut, a more inviting entrance. The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg entrance is tucked inside the reconstructed Public Hospital of 1773—perhaps the only museum one enters via a madhouse. “That process is dramatically counterintuitive for the uninitiated guest,” Hurst says. “A building that is well-designed should tell you what it is by its outward form.”

A new entrance is to face Nassau Street, which runs east of the hospital and now offers a view of a loading dock and staff door. Anderson has walked a tightrope between being too obtrusive, as seen from

Colonial Williamsburg’s Historic Area, and being not obvious enough; between looking too colonial and confusing to the guest and not traditional enough to suit the surroundings.

The initial 2007, prerecession design, Hurst says, “was very modern—it didn’t say ‘eighteenth-century’—and donors, staff, and city officials all rejected it. So we worked together to come up with another plan.” Anderson says that any pronounced modernism threatens to “call attention to itself for itself, as too many modernist buildings do, and be dissonant with Colonial Williamsburg.”

His final version comes down on the side of colonial style, featuring a two-story brick block fronted by arcaded wings, all derived from the Renaissance design books of Palladio, popular in the eighteenth century. Fund-raising has begun. There are to be an additional 8,000 square feet of exhibit space and a new face forward to the public—making the Art Museums one of many facilities to reinvent itself in the golden age of museums. ▲

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