

Book Review

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Heather Ewing and Amy Ballard, *A Guide to Smithsonian Architecture*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2022, paperback USD \$14.95, pp. 167

In the United States, the word 'Smithsonian' might bring a familiar image to mind: a row of buildings stretching from the US White House to the Lincoln Memorial, stuffed to the brim with artefacts from across the nation and around the world. Perhaps uniquely, that image – an eclectic mix of buildings, seated side by side on the National Mall – makes it clear there is more to Smithsonian museums than the artefacts inside. Indeed, Heather Ewing and Amy Ballard qualify the Smithsonian's 'largest' (10) collection not by number of objects, but by literal size – and that collection is not the gargantuan holdings of the National Air and Space Museum. It is the *physical* Smithsonian: the brick-and-mortar buildings that shape and are shaped by the unique collections within.

Beautifully illustrated, well-organized, and moving swiftly from space to space – like tourists rushing across the National Mall, squeezing multiple museum visits into a single day – *A Guide to Smithsonian Architecture* is a valuable introduction to the physical environs of the Smithsonian Institution. The second edition, published in 2022, adds a chapter on the National Museum of African American History and Culture to its whistle-stop tour of over twenty-five Smithsonian buildings.

After an eloquent foreword by Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G Bunch III, the Preface and Introduction lay the groundwork for more detailed discussions of the relevant buildings. The authors suggest each building has a singular context in the National Mall, the city of Washington, DC, and elsewhere, as well as a unique relationship to the personalities behind the Smithsonian. While relegating a 'strictly architectural chronology' (11) to the back of the book, the authors promise 'an introduction to the Smithsonian's architecture as it explores how the Smithsonian has grown over the course of its 175-year history...' (15). Ewing and Ballard further emphasize – rephrasing the point several times – that 'the Smithsonian's architecture reflects the acquisition and the growth of the collections, but it also reveals a changing understanding of museology, of how to present objects to the public, and of how to care for and curate them' (20).

In chapters ranging from four to ten pages, the book introduces readers to the Smithsonian in a new light, from the well-known and beloved features of the National Mall to overlooked abodes outside the US Capitol. Called *A Guide to Smithsonian Architecture*, the book is not burdened with technical jargon about architecture, period styles, or building methods and materials. Each chapter explores a broader context: the Smithsonian as a whole, the nature of its collections, and how its growing mandate has shaped its unique buildings. As newer buildings are introduced, so too come descriptions of their architectural relationship to pre-existing Smithsonian museums, as well as new priorities like environmental sustainability. Landscaping and interior decor are also given their due.

Aside from highlighting the importance of Smithsonian buildings, the book contains a second thesis. Glossed as 'the Smithsonian', or 'Smithsonian museums', the organization's proper name is the Smithsonian Institution, hinting at one of its critical functions. By discussing the design of the National Zoo and the Conservation Biology Institute, *A Guide to Smithsonian Architecture* reminds the reader that the Smithsonian is not only a collection of museums but has a scientific mission to study life on Earth and the origins of the universe. In service to this thesis, there are brief descriptions of multiple research centres and observatories, though it is difficult to say much about the architecture of residential laboratories and telescopes.

While each chapter is a self-contained goldmine of information and fast facts about the building in question, they are just that – self-contained. Not every chapter addresses the full range of issues alluded to in the Introduction. Architectural styles are identified, but why these choices were made is not always clear. Chapters on the Smithsonian Castle, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, for example, clearly communicate architectural influences, but chapters on pre-existing buildings acquired by the Smithsonian at a later date do not address the same question in detail. Chapters on the National Museum of American History, and the National Air and Space Museum, situate their design and construction in the context of political events in the US, but the chapter on the Freer Art Gallery lingers on the outsized influence of the donor instead.

It is tempting to describe these differences as inconsistencies, but if every chapter discussed decorative motifs, historical context, architectural analysis, and the history of the building projects, this would be a much longer book – a scholarly analysis, albeit a fascinating one. But it is not the goal of the authors to provide a rigorous academic discussion; even the ‘architectural chronology’ (11) mentioned earlier is simply a list of names and dates. Clearly, to fulfil its role as a popular guide, the authors selected the most important influences on architecture and design, providing what context is needed to understand the significance of each building. For those interested in scholarly studies, the bibliography points the way to other publications about individual museums and their architecture.

There is, however, another subject that deserves more attention: something mentioned in the Introduction and alluded to throughout, but with more elaboration may aid the reader’s appreciation of the changing role of Smithsonian museums. The McMillan Commission and the McMillan Plan for the Washington Mall were established in 1901 and are largely responsible for unifying the public edifices of the US Capitol under the Neoclassical banner. Addressing the political and social connotations of this decision – including its consequences for minoritized communities left out of traditional nation-building processes (see Giebelhausen 2008) – would not be beyond the average reader, and would lend further weight to the chapter on the Anacostia Community Museum, as well as underscore the revolutionary nature of the design processes behind the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Stories of the difficulty – not just the triumph – of designing these aforementioned museums deserve to be told. The chapter on the National Museum of the American Indian glows with pride over the ‘active partnership’ and ‘consultative process’ that were ‘unique in the Smithsonian’s history’ (141), but the journey was not all sunshine and roses.¹ With two new Smithsonian museums on the way (the National American Women’s History Museum and the National Museum of the American Latino), addressing how such challenges are manifest in architectural choices will be invaluable if a third edition of this volume is published, as Ewing and Ballard hint.

All told, *A Guide to Smithsonian Architecture* is a compelling introduction to an infinitely complex topic. Engaging and visually stunning, each chapter gives a satisfying overview of a different Smithsonian building, opening the door to further questions about the role of architecture in public spaces and sparking a new appreciation for these fixtures of the US national consciousness. Acknowledging its purpose and its limitations, this book offers the reader a glimpse at the tangled web of subjects surrounding museology and the museum world, revealing more to these beautiful buildings than meets the eye.

Notes

- 1 Kevin Gover, Amy Scott, and W. Richard West, ‘Native American Museums & Art: Museums in the 21st Century: An Institution Transformed’, Henry Luce Foundation 2022. <https://www.hluce.org/news/articles/video-museums-21st-century-institution-transformed/>, accessed 9 September 2022.

References

Giebelhausen, M. (2008) 'The Architecture is the Museum', in Janet Marstine (ed) *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, 37-63, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

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