

National museum of
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The National Museum of the American Indian The much celebrated building of the National Museum of the American Indian was established by an Act of Congress in 1989 and is the sixteenth in the world famous Smithsonian museum series. 1 It is located in the Mall in Washington DC amidst many other buildings of national importance, and although it shares their prestigious location and mission to document and present the greatest and best aspects of American cultures, it has many features that make it stand out. The Museum's website explains that proximity to nature and links with the present as well as the past were key aspects of the design concept: " it needed to be a living museum, neither formal nor quiet, located in close proximity to nature." The location which was chosen for the museum contained a stream, and this natural feature, along with the directions of the street outside and the natural north, south, east and west directions were taken into account. This is because native Indian culture places high value on harmony between all aspects of human life and the natural world and even more radically: " the grounds surrounding the building are considered an extension of the building and a vital part of the museum as a whole." 2 The Seattle born architect, Johnpaul Jones, who is of Choctaw, Cherokee and Welsh heritage, consulted with a widely drawn group of native elders and they decided very early that the building and surrounding area would be different from the neoclassical or modernist museum styles: " The museum doesn't have a straight line in it, and is meant to look as though wind and water carved its curves..." 3 These curved external walls are the first feature to strike the visitor who arrives on foot:

" Theres a monumental new presence rising above the elm trees on the

National Mall in Washington, D. C., - and its not like anything else youll see
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there. Its as if a vision from an ancient cliff city of the desert Southwest - five stories worth of honey-colored limestone, rough hewn as if by the wind yet flowing like a river of curving cantilevered walls - had been plopped down at the back door of the U. S. Capitol.” 4

The site was examined by the native elders, who identified a central point and buried a secret object there. This spot now lies at the centre of the domed Potomac atrium which lies to the east of the entrance area. The entrance was not located to face the Mall, but instead it looks east towards the rising sun and, incidentally, towards the U. S. Capitol. The stream was honoured with the creation of a fountain and a wetland area and the architect insisted that all dimensions of the native view of the natural world should be considered: “ It centers around the four worlds: the natural world, the animal world, the human world and the spirit world.” 5 Trees and plants were selected and arranged around the sides of the building to represent major ecological types that for centuries provided everything the native Indian peoples required, and also to illustrate where the medicines, foods and materials and artefacts on show within the main museum derive from. Birds and animals are encouraged to visit the site through the four seasons of the year. Huge weathered stones called “ grandfather rocks” represent the long cultural memory of the landscape, and serve as a welcome to visitors, whether human, animal, bird or spirit, at the entrance area. There are also directional marker stones taken from the four corners of the American Indian traditional areas.

The building has 5 stories and 450, 000 square feet of usable space. Some of the design features demanded technical innovations on a huge scale, for example the slab of roughcast limestone that overhangs the entrance 130
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feet above the ground was constructed from a “ limestone clad V = shaped 750-ton steel arm connected to a massive steel beam that’s sunk into a 30-foot hole.”⁶ Inside the building, there are temporary and permanent gallery spaces, as one would expect, housing collections from the early 20th century banker and collector George Gustav Heye, but also from many donations from contemporary native American individuals and communities. Décor, cafeteria, and spaces for storytelling, dance and film are also heavily influenced by Indian traditions making sure that a visit to the NMAI is an immersing cultural experience.

References

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