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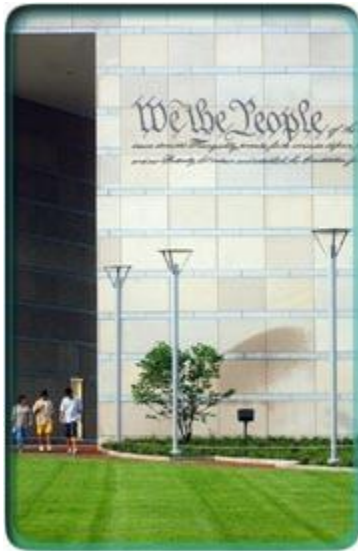
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August 21-27, 2003

## CITYSPACE

### Word House



**Afternoon Constitutional: The center pays homage to our freedoms without resorting to kitsch.** Photo By: Michael T. Regan

## The National Constitution Center, built to commemorate our guiding document, is a stunning success.

*by Harris Steinberg*

"We the People." Three simple words that begin the preamble to the Constitution of the United States, words that shook the world in proclaiming the sovereignty of the people and ordaining a radical, new form of government.

Such is the bedrock message of the story of the U.S. Constitution, hammered out in a hot and humid Philadelphia in 1787. A story in which free men gathered to create a great "tissue of compromise," crafting a ship of state that has weathered the vicissitudes of slavery, a civil war, the civil rights movement and the resignation of a president.

Designing a building about words penned some 200-plus years ago is a tricky proposition. After all, we live in a frenetic, image-saturated electronic culture in which the printed word has been reduced to the parsed and vetted sound bite. The 18th century, on the other hand, relished the written word, arguing and discussing meaning and ideas with élan and brio.

What is remarkable about the new National Constitution Center at the northern end of Independence Mall, a \$140 million museum and education center designed by Harry Cobb of Pei Cobb Freed & Partners with exhibits designed by Ralph Appelbaum, is that it pays elegant homage to the ideas that establish and protect our freedoms without resorting to kitsch.

First and foremost, Cobb's design is about "we," from the broad and welcoming south-facing portico to the generous open-to-the-public Grand Hall and Citizens' Café (with CNN on a large flat-screen monitor, Internet connections at café tables and a lovely view of Independence Hall). The public spaces are comfortable and human-scaled with large windows, great views and lots of natural light. What could be more American than this big, wide, welcoming smile of a building?

Formally, Cobb's design is one of calculated asymmetries and fluid relationships between the parts in a kind of point/counterpoint (the great horizontal stretch of the entrance portico juxtaposed with the modest verticality of the tower at Sixth and Arch), and checks and balances (large expanses of masonry offset by floating panes of glass).

Rendered in muted tones with a restrained palette of limestone, granite and glass both inside and out, the composition is a dynamic flow of space based on portions of circles, reminding us that the sum total of the whole is greater than the multiplicity of our parts and triangles -- a nod to the stability of our tripartite government. Refined detailing clearly articulates the parts of the building, a subtle reminder of the separation of powers and the sanctity of the individual.

In contrast, the exhibition spaces are anything but subtle. Designed to appeal to the MTV generation, Appelbaum and his team have created a dizzying array of eye-popping and interactive exhibits that aim to engage even the most jaded teenager. The multimedia presentation in the circular Kimmel Theater is particularly compelling: Live actors, music and projections onto multiple surfaces continually challenge us to confront ideas of citizenship and freedom.

Reaching out from its site, the National Constitution Center strikes all the right urban notes. As a strong terminus to the Mall, the creamy limestone façade rises gracefully above the disgracefully incomplete Mall landscape, its parapet height matching the cornice of Independence Hall. While the Fifth Street service façade is austere and unwelcoming, the



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Street façade, a gracious urban gesture toward woe-begotten Franklin

Center couldn't be more different from Independence Hall -- horizontal  
mmmetrical, limestone and granite while the hall is predominantly red  
brick, generous expanses of plate glass while the hall sports elegant individual windows of small panes of glass. The  
National Constitution Center is open, inviting and embracing, stretching out into its landscape with minimal visible  
security. The hall is closed and formal, held hostage these days by the onerous security mandate of the Park Service.

And yet the two buildings are perfect complements across space and time, putting virtually all of the buildings on and  
around the Mall to shame -- the turgid U.S. Mint on Fifth Street being the most egregious. Harry Cobb has proven that  
classic modernism is alive and well in a city that all too often demands and builds banal neo-colonial public buildings.  
Look no further than the nearby Independence Visitor Center at Sixth and Market streets.

Some will snicker at the modern architectural vocabulary of the National Constitution Center, with its familial  
relationship to I.M. Pei's East Wing of the National Gallery in Washington. Let them -- it is their right. But know that this  
building is dignified and refined, beautifully crafted and artfully urbane. Neither bombastic nor ironic, this deftly tailored  
building fits the visitor and the site like an exquisitely crafted summer suit, cool and loose. It wears well.

The National Constitution Center is a class act, respectful, restrained and gentle, bold and benign, elegant and  
intelligent -- a modest monument. How fitting for a building that celebrates what is arguably America's greatest  
contribution to Western civilization: words on paper that begin "We the People."

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