

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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## NATIONAL GALLERY SHOWS PLANS FOR PROJECTED EAST BUILDING

WASHINGTON, D.C. May 5, 1971. The plans for the National Gallery of Art's projected East Building were shown to the press and staff at the Gallery today after almost three years of intensive work on the building's design solution.

An exhibit covering these features and the programs for the new building will open to the public off the Rotunda of the Gallery's present building following ground-breaking ceremonies on the site tomorrow afternoon, May 6. The Rotunda exhibit will remain on view indefinitely.

The expansion of the National Gallery occupies what is probably the most prominent unused site left in Washington. It lies directly across Fourth Street from the existing building and faces the U.S. Capitol. An asymmetrical (roughly trapezoidal) plot, it is bounded by the two major axes of Pierre L'Enfant's 1791 plan for the nation's capital, where the spacious Mall, bounded by Constitution Avenue, meets Pennsylvania Avenue, the ceremonial way between the Capitol and the White House.

Faced with a steadily increasing number of visitors each year and a burgeoning collection of art objects, the National Gallery's Trustees decided in 1967 that it was necessary to expand the Gallery's physical plant. Among the most important goals were the creation of a Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts and provision of new exhibition space. The construction budget has been set at \$45 million.

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## THE SITE

Despite its superb location, the site presents many architectural challenges. Any building on it must relate to the existing Gallery building, a symmetrical marble structure designed in neoclassic style by John Russell Pope and completed in 1941. Moreover, the new building must respect and complement its neighbors. These include the white stone Government buildings that line Constitution Avenue and form the Federal Triangle, and such important edifices along Pennsylvania Avenue as the National Archives and the Post Office Building. Complicating the urban design problem, the buildings along the Mall follow one general height, while the ones along Pennsylvania Avenue follow a higher one. The Gallery's East Building is the one structure in Washington to have to live well with its neighbors on both areas at once.

## THE DESIGN

The resulting project has been approved by the National Capital Planning Commission and the Fine Arts Commission. It consists, first of all, of the new East Building. A complex structure, it might best be described as a trapezoid divided diagonally into two complementary triangles. The larger of these faces the existing museum across Fourth Street. Visitors entering through the high portal will find themselves in a glass-enclosed, skylit sculpture area--the heart of the project. Besides providing a spacious setting for sculpture, the space, with its greenery, serves as an easy transition from the Mall park, and acts as a natural orientation space for groups of Gallery goers and the individual visitor. From there, visitors will move to one of three distinct "house museums," each containing about 12,000 square feet of gallery space on four levels and each connected to the others by exhibition bridges, or to a concourse level facility for temporary exhibitions.

The other triangular portion of the East Building is the new Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts. To be used by scholars and the museum staff, the Center consists of offices arranged around

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a six-story library, plus a small gallery for special exhibits. Near the top, it also contains a terrace café, with a commanding view of the Mall for Gallery visitors.

The East Building will be constructed of Tennessee marble, the same material used for the existing National Gallery. To emphasize the relationship with the older building, the entrance façade of the new one and its easternmost tower follow precisely the same longitudinal axis that runs through the center of the existing building. On a subtler level, the confronting façades of the two buildings relate to each other in a dynamic spatial dialogue--a give and take of volumes and voids.

While the East Building is aligned with the rectangular street grid on three sides, its fourth side follows the slant of Pennsylvania Avenue. In this way, the new building continues the sweep of imposing façades along Washington's "grand axis," the ceremonial route of Presidents. Similarly, the East Building's taller elements (the "house museums") maintain the cornice line established by other structures on Pennsylvania Avenue, while its long, lower elements (the exhibition bridges) relate to the buildings on Constitution Avenue.

#### CONNECTING LINK

Linking the East and West Buildings of the National Gallery will be the second major component of the expansion program, a long concourse structure below street level. Gaining light and a sense of movement by a large circular glass-sided fountain, this facility will contain 176,000 square feet, comprising a 700-seat cafeteria, a print and book salesroom, and a central shipping and receiving area.

In total, the program will create enough new space (591,000 square feet) so that virtually the entire ground floor of the existing building, now devoted in substantial part to administrative offices and storage, will be free for public use.

A broad plaza will stretch between the existing building and the East Building. Paved with granite cobblestones and surrounded

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by trees, it will be enlivened by the play of water in the fountain and the bustle of pedestrians.

### HISTORY

Provisions for expansion were made for future Gallery use by reserving the property to the east of the present building when the site for the National Gallery of Art was designated by Public Resolution of the 75th Congress on March 24, 1937.

This Congressional action was confirmed by the 90th Congress, with passage by both houses of Public Law 90-376, approved on July 5, 1968,--action which in turn authorized the Gallery's Board of Trustees also to construct a building on the site previously reserved.

On November 6, 1967, the President of the United States announced from the White House a gift from Mr. Paul Mellon, president of the National Gallery, and his sister, the late Ailsa Mellon Bruce, towards the construction of the project.

Final design plans have been presented to the National Capital Planning Commission and the Fine Arts Commission, and approval to proceed with construction was given by these commissions on March 31, 1971, and April 21, 1971. These actions included approval of an environmental report.

In 1968, Congressional authorization was followed by the Trustees' appointment of the architects of the East Building project, I. M. Pei & Partners of New York. The East Building is expected to be operational in 1975.

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