

## **Let's make it revolutionary: the design of the new Museum of the American Revolution**

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A design for the new Museum of the American Revolution in Old City was presented to the Design Advocacy Group this month. We believe it's not worthy of the museum's prominent location, ambitious leaders, or talented architect.

The museum has the potential to complete a great sweep of Independence National Historical Park institutions spanning from the National Constitution Center to Third and Chestnut Streets, the museum's proposed location. Its collections can add an important piece of the story of early America that is told by the region's other museums and historic sites. And its designer, Robert A.M. Stern Architects, has already given Philadelphia one of its best buildings of the last 50 years, the Comcast Center.

Living up to such expectations requires better architecture. The present proposal would produce a building that looks smaller than it is. Its strongest gesture would be a small cupola that vaguely echoes the tower of Independence Hall and would be overshadowed by the larger cupola of the neighboring U.S. Custom House.

The body of the proposed building is a rather bleak mass, which the designers insist must be windowless to protect the collections - despite the contrary, brilliantly sunlit example of the new Barnes Foundation. Its facade on Chestnut, a major pedestrian street, is especially blank.

The style of the design is a mixture of historical borrowings, largely from early-19th-century English architecture. There is no useful symbolism in this, and, worse, the borrowed forms are not assembled to make a powerful architectural statement.

The design does not have to be historical. The National Park Service's guidelines do not require it, nor do the Philadelphia Historical Commission's. In fact, both favor architecture that, like all great architecture, speaks in the language of its time.

Nor is there a coherent historical context into which the building can blend, even if that were desirable in a major work of public architecture. Its Chestnut Street neighbors are the skyscraper Custom House (1930s) to the east and a medley of mid-19th-century commercial buildings to the north. Across Third Street is the grand marble portico of the First Bank of the United States (1795-97). Nothing could match this mélange.

Most important, a museum that is dedicated to a better understanding of the past does not have to look old or mimic the architecture of the period it memorializes. We are regularly delighted by the modern homes of old things - like the new Barnes, in which a historic institution has been re-presented in a compelling, contemporary way. Indeed, imitating historic buildings in a place like Philadelphia, which is so richly endowed with real ones, is like humming along at a concert, making it harder for the audience to hear the real music.

The Stern firm can do excellent modern work, and the museum's leaders would be wise to ask them to shift stylistic gears for this potential landmark. But the firm is also capable of better historical work, and it should at least be asked to address several significant weaknesses in the design:

It needs to make the most of its location, which affords views of the ample lawns of the national park, with a bolder, more original tower.

To avoid looking big but unimpressive, it should be more strongly articulated. The monotonous predominance of brick should be reconsidered.

While a proposed ground-floor café on Third Street makes a good start at appropriate neighborliness in a commercial district, the Chestnut Street front cries out for more openness.

These problems should be fixed so the building can live up to the importance of its site and purpose. And they should be fixed whether or not the museum goes with a historical design - though it would be strange to build a museum devoted to revolutionary deeds that chooses to look backward.



David B. Brownlee is vice chairman of the Design Advocacy Group, which aims to encourage public discussion of design and advocate design excellence. He wrote this on behalf of the group's steering committee. This article was published in the Philadelphia Inquirer.