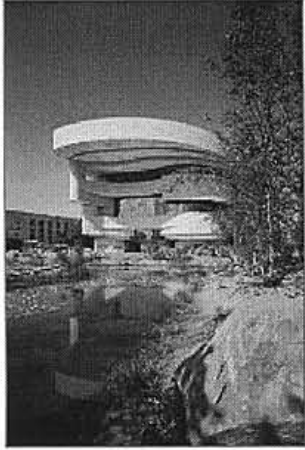


American Indian Museum Set to Open in Washington

Mon Aug 30, 2004 10:43 AM ET



By Nicole Spiridakis

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - It could be a rock formation from the U.S. Southwest, carved by water and wind, but this structure is no cliff dwelling.

It is the newest Smithsonian museum on Washington's National Mall, and its resemblance to desert formations is no accident. The National Museum of the American Indian, set to open on Sept. 21, covers past and present Native American life.

Built from gold-toned Minnesota limestone, the curving five-story Washington building is set between the National Air and Space Museum and the U.S. Botanic Gardens.

"The building should be like a natural element in some way," said Duane Blue Spruce, an American Indian architect on the NMAI's staff. "It made sense that the building have the appearance of a natural rock formation that's been carved by wind and water over time."

More than 10,000 Indians are expected to participate in the opening ceremony's First Nations procession and festival, said museum spokeswoman Amy Drapeau. There will be tribal dances and a six-day festival of music, dance and story-telling.

"The Smithsonian is honored to present this vital new museum, created by Native peoples from this hemisphere," Smithsonian Institution Secretary Lawrence Small said. "Its importance can't be over-estimated."

Ground broke for the \$199 million Washington museum in 2000 but an act of Congress launched the National Museum of the American Indian in 1989. In addition to the mall site, the NMAI includes the George Gustav Heye center in lower Manhattan and the Cultural Resources Center, a research and collections facility in Suitland, Maryland.

Evoking native sensibilities, the new museum faces east toward the rising sun, features a 120-foot-high entrance rotunda and prism window and references to nature and the stars abound in its design.

"It was always desired that the building be somewhat iconographic in its form," said Blue Spruce, who served as a liaison between the museum and the design consultants and contractors.

A NATIVE PLACE

Drawing from extensive consultations with American Indian communities, the architectural team began its work in early 1995. A main goal was to give visitors the sense of arriving at a Native American place.

In the landscape surrounding the 4.25-acre museum site, the design team chose to reintroduce indigenous plant life existing prior to European contact.

Scattered throughout the forest, wetlands, meadowlands and traditional crop areas are more than 40 "grandfather rocks," which Blue Spruce explained are seen as elders of the landscape and speak to the longevity of Native people.

A water feature, recalling the tidal waterway Tiber Creek that originally flowed through what is now the National Mall, runs along the north side of the property.

The museum was organized mainly by Indians and covers not only American Indian traditions but also other native peoples of the Western Hemisphere.

European colonization of the Americas beginning in the 15th century decimated Indian populations through disease and warfare. Westward expansion by the United States in the 19th century further displaced and deprived American Indians of their lives and culture.

According to 2003 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, 2.75 million American Indians -- less than 1 percent of the population -- live in the United States today. Native communities struggle with a legacy of poverty and discrimination.

The museum is governed by a 23-member board of trustees, 14 of whom are American Indian. Richard West, a Southern Cheyenne, serves as its founding director.

About 7,500 objects from the museum's permanent collection will be on view in Washington within three major exhibitions. Beadwork, baskets and pottery from the tribes or native communities of North, Central and South America, history told from a native point of view and a contemporary view of native life are the main focal points.

The "Contemporary Lives and Culture" exhibit deals with issues facing American Indians today and the turbulent times of the 1960s and '70s "Red Power" Indian rights movement.

Blue Spruce said he anticipates American Indian response to the museum will be favorable.

"The building being here and in this location is making a very significant statement that goes well behind exhibitions," Blue Spruce said. "By the museum having taken its place here on the Mall, it's a very important thing to many people both symbolically and as a museum."

© Copyright Reuters 2004. All rights reserved. Any copying, re-publication or re-distribution of Reuters content or of any content used on this site, including by framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without prior written consent of Reuters.

Quotes and other data are provided for your personal information only, and are not intended for trading purposes. Reuters, the members of its Group and its data providers shall not be liable for any errors or delays in the quotes or other data, or for any actions taken in reliance thereon.

© Reuters 2004. All rights reserved. Republication or redistribution of Reuters content, including by caching, framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Reuters. Reuters and the Reuters sphere logo are registered trademarks and trademarks of the Reuters group of companies around the world.

[Close This Window](#)