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Imaginary Tour

The clang of power shovels and the chuff of bulldozers at a building site on the Mall in Washington serve to remind us that things are looking up for the Smithsonian Institution. For it is on this site, opposite the Department of Labor and within view of both the Capitol and the Washington Monument, that excavation has begun for the first of several building projects for the U.S. National Museum, which has been operated by the Smithsonian Institution since its inception one hundred years ago and which has never been adequately housed or financed. The new building, a \$36 million, five-story structure of modern design (an architectural rendering is reproduced on page 1074), will house the Museum of History and Technology.

It was only after World War II that Congress began to step up appropriations for the museum and to plan for a substantial expansion of its facilities. At present only a small fraction of the vast collection of 44 million objects is on public display in the several buildings that make up the museum: the National Air Museum, the Natural History Building, the Arts and Industries Building, and the Smithsonian itself. With a few laudable exceptions, the exhibits are all-too-reminiscent of the worst taste of the Victorian Age; this is understandable, for it was during that Age that they were planned and, until recently, little money has been available to change them. The exhibits crowd old-fashioned glass-walled cabinets, cluster along the walls, hang from the ceilings. The visitor may sometimes feel that he himself is merely an animated specimen encased in a gigantic what-not.

But this is changing. The Natural History Building, erected in 1911, is being renovated, and its exhibits are being transformed into the eye-catching and instructive displays that characterize the best of the modern museums; when two new wings, already authorized, are completed, the building will be adequate for both display and research functions.

The Air Museum has an outstanding collection, but much of it is in warehouses. The objects that are on display are housed in a sheet-iron shed and are so crowded together that the visitor must thread his way among them with distracting caution. A new building to house this collection and give it the space it needs will be put up on the Mall opposite the National Gallery of Art.

Of all of these projects, the new Museum of History and Technology will be the first to be completed. The collections that will form the nucleus for its displays are now housed in the Arts and Industries Building, which was put up as a "temporary" structure in 1881. With the aid of the director, Frank Taylor, and the blueprints for the building, we were recently able to take an imaginary tour through it. We were much impressed by plans for the fine auditorium completely equipped for scientific demonstrations and wired for television production; by the classrooms for school children; by the carefully planned halls equipped with working models of apparatus so arranged as to let the visitor follow the historical development of the subject and understand the principles involved. There is much here for children, for nonspecialist adults, and even for the specialist whose background in his subject may be incomplete. Nothing has been neglected to make this one of the world's finest museums.

At the beginning of the museum's second century, the outlook is bright. We may confidently expect the Smithsonian Institution to remain outstanding in research and to become one of the world's greatest public museums. This development will permit the institution to carry out, more effectively than ever, the wishes of its founder—that it have as its aims "the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men."—G.DuS.