

Architect Frank Gehry's concept for Eisenhower memorial sets aside popular curvilinear style

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When the Dwight D. Eisenhower National Memorial Commission chose Frank Gehry as architect, a year ago, there were two questions: Will it look like a Gehry? And should it look like a Gehry?

The answer, as of Thursday's meeting at which the 12 commissioners chose a preliminary design concept, is *no* on both counts. The memorial, which will be built on a four-acre parcel just south of the Mall near the National Air and Space Museum, will be a mix of traditional and contemporary elements, but none of them scream Frank Gehry.



"If people are expecting that this will be Bilbao or Walt Disney redux, they'll be surprised," said Daniel J. Feil, executive architect for the commission and the man in charge of the design and construction process. Gehry's signature work, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, redefined architecture at the end of the last century, and its respectable twin, the Walt Disney Concert Hall, extended that idiom of torqued metal and curving volumes into the downtown core of Los Angeles.

The design chosen by the commission Thursday was the most elaborate of three proposals submitted by Gehry, but it stands to the side of Gehry's popular curvilinear style. Instead, Gehry has proposed closing off a newly defined square defined by the intersection of Independence and Maryland avenues and Fourth and Sixth streets SW. The north and south sides of "Eisenhower Square" will be lined by huge limestone columns, the interior filled with a grove of large oaks and a semicircular space made of a rough assemblage of monolithic stone blocks. There will also be carvings and inscriptions and a service building.

But the most intriguing and potentially most problematic element of the design are three huge tapestries, made of woven metal. Preliminary models show one tapestry running along almost the full height and length of the north face of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Department of Education Building. That could limit light and affect sightlines for workers who once had views to the Mall.

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Gehry, who attended the commission's Capitol Hill news conference, said that the tapestry would be translucent and that it will stand 90 to 100 feet away from the Education Department building, which is essentially the width of a city street.

"Having said that, we're very concerned about that issue," Gehry said of the tapestry's impact on the LBJ building.

Gehry, 81, said he does not often enter the sort of design competition that led to his selection for the project, which is estimated to cost between \$90 million and \$110 million and tentatively scheduled to open in 2015. But he was moved by the figure of Eisenhower and his often overlooked contributions. It "made me very tearful to realize that this great man was not recognized," Gehry said.

Gehry was not an obvious choice to memorialize one of this country's least flashy presidents. But when the commission, which was established in 1999, started looking for an architect, it announced an ambitious agenda for a memorial that wouldn't just be an urban amenity and a tourist draw but also "a new vision of memorialization; a new paradigm for memorials." The decision to go forward with Gehry was clearly a bold move to meet the last of those criteria.

The tapestry idea is proof that Gehry won't take the easy route. The metal curtain, which Gehry says will be woven as if on "an old Jacquard loom," will feature images of Eisenhower's life. Metal scrims and curtains are nothing new in the language of memorials. But the size, the height and its placement -- hiding the bland late-1950s facade of the Education Department building -- are radical.

Gehry has proposed an innovative though blunt solution to a question that haunts Washington: What can be done with the much maligned government architecture south of the Mall? His Gordian knot answer to the problem: Shroud it.

It was clear at Thursday's meeting that the memorial's location, which is bisected by Maryland Avenue and covered with pavement and parking, was the biggest challenge for the architect.

"I saw the site, and I freaked out," Gehry said. " 'Oh my God, how are we going to deal with this kind of site?' "The sentiment was echoed by Anne Eisenhower, the former president's granddaughter, who attended the announcement. "I thought nothing could be done with it," she said.

The location of the memorial, which was decided in 2006 after a five-year process, also caused controversy with some planning advocates who felt that Maryland Avenue should be left open and redeveloped as a vital thoroughfare in keeping with the spirit of Pierre L'Enfant's original city plan. One of Gehry's three proposed designs would have kept the Maryland Avenue alignment as is.

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But the design chosen by what Chairman Rocco C. Siciliano described as a "totally unanimous" commission will divert Maryland Avenue so that a more pedestrian-friendly space can be created. Sightlines up and down the avenue will be maintained by breaking the line of massive columns. Gehry's response may not mollify critics, but by creating a new square at the intersection of L'Enfant's angled avenues, he has worked within long-standing urban responses to the Washington cityscape.

The columns that create this square, however, are also likely to elicit considerable controversy as the design moves forward to the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission in April, the Commission of Fine Arts in May and the National Capital Planning Commission in June. Gehry's design description, released Thursday, says, "The use of colonnades for memorial and ceremonial purposes goes back to the Egyptian and Greek cultures." But the columns have a mute blankness that may read as Soviet, and their scale overwhelms even the Mall's most overtly authoritarian structure, the National World War II Memorial. Their austerity may also feel like an extension of some of the worst dehumanizing elements of L'Enfant Plaza north, to the very edges of the Mall.

And that's the paradox, and perhaps brilliance, of Gehry's design. By hiding the Education Department building, it seems to extend the Mall south. If the Mall's east-west axis is a long nave, the new construct creates an open-air side chapel. But the columns could also draw the soul-killing aesthetic of the bleak government district south of the Mall northward, into Gehry's newly defined square. For a memorial honoring the president who helped establish the U.S. response to the Cold War (not to mention the concrete ribbons of the interstate highway system), this may be an intentional meeting of authoritarian and "open" elements.

Or perhaps that's reading too much into it. By curtaining off the least desirable elements of the architecture south of the Mall, Gehry solves only half of what has been a long-standing Washington design problem: How to entice tourists off the Mall and into the city? It may make the city's most desirable, tourist-trafficked spine feel a bit wider -- and perhaps attract History Channel types, veterans and war pilgrims who can now visit the World War II memorial, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Eisenhower Memorial in one long stroll. But it doesn't open the Mall up to the larger city. It moves the boundaries, but with a giant metal scrim attached to stone tent poles, it doesn't dissolve them.

