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## Frank Gehry refines his Eisenhower Memorial design

By *Philip Kennicott*



A rendering of the Frank Gehry design. (Courtesy Gehry Partners)

Architect Frank Gehry made an official presentation this afternoon to the [U.S. Commission of Fine Arts](#), one of the oversight panels that must approve his designs for a new memorial to Dwight D. Eisenhower. And it was mostly smooth sailing.

Gehry's team has been developing ideas for how to transform a dull, but large plot of land at the intersection of Independence and Maryland Avenues, just south of the National Mall, into a memorial to the man who led the nation to victory in World War II, and then served two terms as president. The concept emerging as their favorite, and which won tentative but general approval from the commissioners, includes a giant colonnade running parallel to Independence Avenue, near the front face of the Lyndon B. Johnson Department of Education Building. Hanging from the free-standing columns, each clad with limestone, will be a stainless steel mesh, woven like fabric to depict an image pertinent to Eisenhower's life and career. Two smaller "tapestries" will be hung closer to Independence Avenue. The plaza will be planted with sycamore trees.

The larger of these tapestries elicited the most comments and questions from the commissioners, who wondered how it would look, whether it could be maintained, and if it was an appropriate feature for a memorial. Among the central concerns is whether it will be transparent enough to allow views through it from the Education building, which forms the south side of the memorial plot.

"I'm really not sure about the tapestries," said commissioner Witold Rybczynski. He worried that they might feel like advertising, or a billboard. Other commissioners raised similar concerns. But in the end, Rybczynski said he "would have to suspend judgment on the tapestry" and he, like the other commissioners, then voted their approval of the preliminary concept design.

Eliciting more definite support were changes to the basic layout of the memorial plaza, which include eliminating some free-standing columns along Independence Avenue, concentrating and simplifying the center of the plaza, and moving a small building that will contain toilets, a park service office and perhaps some concessions. In a previous plan, this was placed on the Northwest corner of the plot, and has now been moved to the less obtrusive Southeast corner. The design team has also



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put more thought in how to make the space between the tapestry and the Education building more park like and pleasant.

Gehry is clearly deeply committed to the tapestry idea, which he said was still a work in progress. Research and development of the idea is ongoing, but he said he was looking for a material sufficiently transparent but also durable and substantial enough to carry a meaningful image. Gehry's team brought along samples, small curtains of mesh which bore the image of a famous photograph of the 34th president. But, he stressed, "for me, they're not good enough yet."



Frank Gehry. (AP)

At lunch, following the CFA meeting, Gehry said that he was inspired by the tapestry idea after sitting for several hours across the street at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. The square, he said, "was a theater for cars." Inspired by the theater idea, he has developed the concept. The two side tapestries placed along Independence Avenue will

help form a "proscenium," and the longer, main tapestry parallel to the Education building functions a bit like a backdrop.

Since he began working on the project, Gehry has been collaborating with the avant garde theater director Robert Wilson, who has contributed at least two ideas central to the evolving concept. Wilson has suggested an image of the landscape near Abilene, Kansas (Eisenhower's boyhood home) as the subject of the main tapestry. And he has suggested a statue element as a focal point near the center of the plaza. As represented in a model shown at the CFA meeting, the landscape image of Abilene helps solve some of the transparency problem: The sky, which occupies the top of the image, would naturally allow for a more transparent weave on the upper half of the tapestry. Gehry is particularly pleased with the idea of representing Abilene, to "bring an image of Middle America into D.C." While the image shown at this afternoon's meeting was taken from a photograph, Gehry said he and his team were also thinking about using an artist to create something non-photographic. But artists, he acknowledged, are troublesome and want creative freedom. "They won't play," he joked.

Gehry says that his team is looking in China and Japan for the technology to weave the curtain of steel. And that he'll weave it himself, if necessary. He says he agrees with the commissioners who are concerned that it may look cheap, or like advertising, or Las Vegas.

"I don't want to leave something like that behind," said the architect, who turns 82 next month.

But he's convinced there is a solution that will satisfy all parties.

"We're much more critical than anything these guys brought up," said Gehry, describing the back and forth in his office about how to create the memorial. The tapestry, he said, will be dignified, like a tapestry by Raphael.

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By Philip Kennicott | January 20, 2011; 3:07 PM ET

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