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Eisenhower memorial passes another test

Commission of Fine Arts OKs design with suggestions for further tweaking

By Meredith Somers

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The commission charged with overseeing the planning and design of monuments in the District approved the general concept of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial on Thursday, but not before offering some suggestions for designers to consider as they work toward final approval.

Thursday's meeting allowed the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts to get a close-up look at changes to the design, which the commission last voted on in 2011.

The idea of a memorial to honor the 34th president has been well-received, but the design has drawn criticism from arts and civic associations, as well as some members of Congress and the Eisenhower family for its scale and its departure from the more classical style of monuments in Washington. It features a park area and stone panels engraved with portraits from Eisenhower's military and political careers set off by 80-foot columns supporting stainless steel tapestries depicting scenes from his Kansas upbringing.

Renowned architect Frank Gehry, well-known for his contemporary designs, has defended his concept, explaining that it was meant to capture the arc of Eisenhower's life, from his humble beginnings in Abilene, Kan.

"From the beginning we've been guided by the great man's words and vision," Mr. Gehry told commission members at the National Building Museum. "Along the way, we've been guided by a lot of people and interested parties, including the family, and we've made changes as we could to accommodate them."

The commission voted 3-1 to proceed with the current design, with three members not present.

Commission member Elizabeth Meyer, who cast the lone dissenting vote, said she "didn't feel comfortable" with the landscaping. While the design plans show trees and green space, the

trees are shown in full foliage and decades old and not an accurate image of what the newly opened memorial would look like.

"The success of a place is not only a function of the experience of the memorial but also be a function of quality of park space," Ms. Meyer said, "This place needs to be a great environment."

Commission member Alex Krieger called the overall design plan "a work of art at the highest order" but suggested Mr. Gehry and his design team rethink tapestries to be placed on the east and west sides of the park.

Mr. Krieger said his concern was that when approaching the memorial from certain angles, the first thing visitors would see were enormous pillars.

"There's a lot of discussion about the president's humility, but one of the first impressions [of the memorial] is one of bigness," he said.

The memorial is planned for a 4-acre plot of land between the National Air and Space Museum and the U.S. Department of Education in Southwest.

At a meeting last month of the memorial commission, during which members approved the design, Mr. Gehry unveiled modest changes, including a bas relief — a type of sculpture that is built into a wall of stone — along with freestanding figures. He also changed the statue of a childlike Eisenhower to a teenage version sitting casually along the memorial's edge, looking out to his future accomplishments depicted in the park.

Justin Shubow, president of the National Civic Art Society, lambasted the design for focusing too much on Eisenhower's small-town upbringing and employing the use of stark steel and gargantuan pillars that "exhibit as much artistry as an incomplete highway overpass."

"Mr. Gehry's design is topsy-turvy in its scale and symbolism," he said.

More than \$60 million has been appropriated for the memorial since it was approved by President Clinton in 1999, and the Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial Commission has requested an additional \$51 million for construction costs for its fiscal 2014 budget.

An analysis released last week by the Congressional Budget Office concluded that scrapping the current design and developing a new plan would cost \$17 million.

The design plans still require approval from the National Capital Planning Commission and the memorial itself must be reauthorized by Congress.

Eisenhower graduated from West Point and served in World War I before becoming the commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces during World War II. He served as president from 1953 to 1961.

Commission members suggested one bas relief should protrude farther out from the sculpture wall to better show Eisenhower as president surrounded by supporters.

Mr. Gehry said in looking through photographs and talking with people familiar with Eisenhower he learned that the man "was much more comfortable in a group of people."

"It's all about how to relate people in the park to the statuary reliefs," he said. "We're trying to be informal yet monumental."

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