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Eisenhower Memorial unchanged, despite objections

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WASHINGTON — Architect Frank Gehry is maintaining key elements of his design for a memorial honoring President Dwight D. Eisenhower near the National Mall in a revised concept presented Thursday, despite recent criticism from a federal arts panel and outside groups.

Gehry's Los Angeles-based team presented revisions to the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, but the changes were limited primarily to the landscape design, adding 74 trees to a planned memorial park.

Gehry has designed a park framed by large metal tapestries depicting the Kansas landscape of Eisenhower's boyhood home. Statues of Ike as president and World War II general would stand at the center. The tapestries, though, have drawn some of the harshest criticism from Eisenhower's family and others.

The Commission of Fine Arts, which oversees art and architecture in the nation's capital, has praised Gehry's "artistic vision of the memorial" and the "monumental stainless steel tapestries." But the panel has questioned the design's clarity and suggested some tapestries should be eliminated. In November, several members objected to the towering columns and two side tapestries in Gehry's design.

Gehry made no changes in response, though, and did not attend Thursday's meeting. Craig Webb of Gehry's firm said the tapestries would evoke Eisenhower's values and spirit of modesty by showing his Midwest roots, as well as unify the space at the urban memorial site.

"We are staying with the overall big ideas for the project," he said.

Commissioners on Thursday generally favored the landscape design changes and didn't comment further on Gehry's tapestries or press for changes.

"I think the landscape, which is what we are here to talk about today, has moved along in a positive way," said commission Chairman Earl A. Powell III, who is director of the National Gallery of Art.

The commission's feedback on the memorial's progress was positive overall, said Chris Cimko, a spokeswoman for the federal Eisenhower Memorial Commission.



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"We look forward to continuing our discussion and refining the project on our way to final approval from the Commission of Fine Arts," she said.

Others said the architect's uncompromising stance on the design has cost the project support from the Eisenhower family and in Congress. In the most recent federal budget, Congress eliminated funding to build the memorial.

Bruce Cole, the newest member of the federal Eisenhower Memorial Commission and a critic of Gehry's design, said there has been no discussion among commissioners on making changes.

"My feeling about this is that the larger issues are not trees," he said, "but whether they will ever get enough appropriated money to build this thing."

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