

New Report Takes Aim at Gehry's Eisenhower Memorial

The architect's plans for a memorial to the 34th President of the United States received yet another blow this week.

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Frank Gehry's embattled design for the proposed Eisenhower Memorial got even more embattled this past week with the release of a 58-page report drafted by the House Natural Resources Committee. *New York Times* reporter Robin Pogrebin, among several others, quickly parsed through the report's claims to paint a bleak picture of the design's future.

There is no question that the Gehry design is imperilled. For the past two years, Congress has failed to approve funds for the memorial's construction, and that's not likely to change in the upcoming budget. But I thought there were a few glaring omissions in Pogrebin's story. The report was not exactly sanctioned and approved by the committee. In fact, the *Washington Post* reported on July 25th, upon the report's release, that not a single member of the committee signed on to it. According to one of my sources in D.C., the document is the work of a single staffer. A subcommittee staffer, on what's called in Washington a "B committee." If you read the *Times* account, you would have been led to the incorrect conclusion that the House Committee had called the Gehry design a "five-star folly." No, a subcommittee staffer with a clear ideological agenda dropped that epithet.

Later in the piece, Pogrebin quotes Justin Shubow, president of the National Civic Art Society in Washington, and Sam Roche, a spokesman for Right by Ike: Project for a New Eisenhower Memorial. Shubow has been waging a one-man war against the design since the outset. Both Roche and Shubow have been funded in this public relations effort by Richard Driehaus, the Chicago businessman who underwrites the Driehaus Prize for classical architecture. (See a pattern here?) Carol Ross Joynt, writing in the May issue of *Washingtonian* magazine, has penned the definitive account of the whole sorry matter.

Even the one solid piece of news in the Pogrebin story was somewhat incomplete in its telling. She reported that the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPA) in April voted 7-3 against approving the Gehry design. This is true, as far as it goes. But according to another Washington source I contacted, the result of the meeting found Gehry—who has demonstrated almost biblical patience throughout—agreeing to rework the scheme yet again. Granted, given the fierce nature of the opposition, that might be

impossible, but it was the ultimate outcome of the NCPC meeting in April.

What was especially frustrating about the *Times* piece was its utter failure to at least acknowledge the nature of much of the opposition. Yes, there's been smart criticism lodged against the Gehry design. And all of that is a legitimate part of the discourse. But much of the opposition has been highly organized and funded by groups engaged in a culture war. That this whole episode sadly mirrors the larger paralysis gripping Washington should come as no surprise, since it's coming virtually from the same place: the American Right Wing, Culture Division.