

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City



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Founded 1923

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Chair

Stephen A. Hansen

Marcel C. Acosta, AICP

Executive Director

National Capital Planning Commission

401 9th Street, N.W., North Lobby, Suite 500

Washington, D.C. 20004

Vice-Chair

Meg Maguire

Secretary

Erik Hein

SUBJECT: Comments on the Latest Design for the World War I Memorial in Pershing Park

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Carol F. Aten

Dear Mr. Acosta:

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Judy Chesser

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The Committee of 100 on the Federal City (Committee of 100), founded in 1923, is the District of Columbia's oldest citizen planning organization. The Committee of 100 has been especially interested in the design of the proposed World War I Memorial in Pershing Park, located at Pennsylvania Avenue NW and 14th Street, NW. This is an important location, just south of Downtown, at the north edge of the Monumental Core and just east of the White House area. These comments are based on the latest proposed design for the World War I Memorial which has been presented to the National Capital Planning Commission for review at the Commission's October 4, 2018 meeting.

The development of designs for the World War I Memorial in Pershing Park has been a complicated process. Pershing Park, which is considered a landmark example of modernist landscape architecture, was designed by M. Paul Friedberg in 1980 and then Oehme van Sweden added additional landscape elements. The review and discussion of the design of the World War I Memorial by the Consulting Parties, and the National Capital Planning Commission and the Commission of Fine Arts, has been a lengthy and a somewhat contentious process.

945 G Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20001

202.681.0225

info@committeeof100.net

On one hand, there are a number of members of the Consulting Parties who do not want any changes to the historic Pershing Park landscape and would like to see the original elements of the design, especially the pool and fountain, retained in the World War I Memorial design. The design team for the World War I Memorial has presented a range of proposed designs over the last several years. Gradually, these designs have evolved to more respect the original design of Pershing Park, though still proposing significant changes.

The Committee of 100 has advocated retaining as much of the original Pershing Park design as possible while still accommodating the World War I Memorial in a meaningful way. We therefore offer the following observations and recommendations. These comments build on the C100 comments made to the National Park Service in a letter of March 15, 2018 and have been adjusted and updated based on the latest design which is to be reviewed by the National Capital Planning Commission at its October 4 meeting.

Pool and Walkway Design

The Committee of 100 has advocated a simplified design in terms of the walkways and the pool. The latest design still has an “L” shaped walkway (when seen from the south). The southern leg of this walkway is over the pool, separated from the steps on the south by about eight feet of water. The other part of the walkway extends north, in front of the World War I Memorial Sculpture Wall and separated from the Memorial Wall by about 2.5 feet of water. There is one version (designated the preferred combination, on p. 36) which shows a “U” shaped walkway design. The Committee continues to recommend a simplified arrangement of the walkways and pool.

The Committee of 100 suggests shifting the southern walkway south about eight feet so that it adjoins the sloping steps along the south edge of the park. This would mean that the pool would not be broken up by a walkway. We believe this change would make the pool more meaningful and be closer to the original design. This change would also provide a direct walk from the Pershing Statue area to the World War I Memorial Wall and could provide for a stair walkway to the upper level on the west side of Pershing Park.

We note that the preferred combination design proposes a scrim in one area in front of the sculpture wall. This apparently is primarily to allow the water to be turned off and chairs placed on the dry scrim area for special events. In fact, this results in additional maintenance work since the drained scrim area would have to be cleaned before each event. Additionally, visitors would be more likely to walk through the scrim than to walk through a 12- to 16-inch deep pool. At an earlier Consulting Parties meeting, fears were raised about the World War I Memorial becoming a "water park," where visitors might undermine the intended experience of the memorial by walking in the water features. For both these reasons, we suggest that the pool depth remain as in the previous design.

Design of the Memorial Sculpture Wall

The February 13, 2018 Design Concept provided two options for the Memorial Sculpture Wall. The first was “Option A: Freestanding Wall” and the second was “Option B: Integrated Wall” which filled the area back of the wall. In our March 15, 2018 comments, we indicated that we thought that “Option B: Integrated Wall” would be the best solution. However, the Commission of Fine Arts approved the “Freestanding Wall” at its July 19, 2018 meeting and that is what is being presented to NCPC at its October 4 Meeting. The Committee of 100 believes that the Freestanding Wall is also an appropriate design.

Sculpture Wall Features

At the February 13, 2018 Consulting Parties Meeting, a separate small model of the Memorial Wall was presented. This sculpture wall is to be separated from the north-south walkway by about 2.5 feet of water. The sculpture wall model shows a number of metal figures symbolizing the course of World War I with many gun barrels, bayonets, etc. sticking out. There was some discussion of the danger this presented to people who might lean across the narrow pool to touch the sculpture, or even wade in the pool to touch the sculpture. There was some indication from the design team that some sculpture features could be drawn back in order to lessen the danger. This is a serious question, and we believe more attention to the design, height and setback from the walkway is needed. No additional information has been presented on this issue so we do not know if it has been addressed, or will be addressed.

Interpretation of the Sculpture Wall

The sculpture wall is a symbolic work of art but there is a question of how visitors can understand what it means, and how well it represents the progression and meaning of World War I. We believe that the area of the present kiosk, which is proposed to be removed and replaced by six flagpoles, might instead be replaced by some low-height information features that would in some way explain the “meaning” of the sculpture wall and the historical “meaning” of World War I. Information could be provided on walls or plaques, by information brochures, and by electronic means. The design presented for the October 4 meeting indicates different locations where more information could be provided. This matter needs much more attention and refinement, hopefully to be addressed in the next phase of design. It is very important that visitors to the World War I Memorial be able to gain an understanding and perspective on World War I and not just look at a sculpture wall.

Access for Persons with Disabilities

There was some discussion at the February 13 Consulting Parties meeting about the need for improved access for persons with disabilities, following current standards that were not in effect in 1980 when Pershing Park was designed. The Committee of 100 agrees with this need while noting that such access design must be carefully considered. One place where additional railings should be considered is at the south end of the Memorial Wall, where many people will want to go up and down the stairs. This is especially true if the walkway now in the pool can be shifted south, as recommended by the Committee of 100.

Pershing Statue Area

Some more discussion of the Pershing statue area would be useful. It would also be useful to have more information about what is to be done, if anything, to the walls, etc. around the Pershing statue. The walls now provide text and maps but are difficult to read.

World War I Information

The sculpture at the west end of the pool is the main World War I commemorative feature. We do have questions about how the visitor to the World War I Memorial will gain some appreciation of American involvement in the war, as well as the effect on Europe and the rest of the world. Will this be handled at

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the Pershing area at the southeast corner of Pershing Park? How will information on World War I be provided to visitors by National Park Service rangers in the form of tours, brochures, etc. While we understand that such operating matters will come later, we believe it will be useful to think about what information will be provided and how they might relate to the overall park design.

Next Steps

Five weeks and three days from October 4 is November 11, 2018, the date when the United States and other countries will remember and commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I on November 11, 1918 (Armistice Day). We understand the desire of the United States World War I Centennial Commission to push for quick approvals of the design of the World War I Memorial and to move ahead to construction. However, there are still many issues unresolved or unaddressed in the current design proposal presented to the National Capital Planning Commission.

Once a design is approved and constructed, the World War I Memorial in Pershing Park will be in place for many decades to come and will be visited by millions of people, both Americans and foreign visitors. It is important to get the design right so that visitors to the memorial will not only see the physical memorial, hopefully improved in some respects over the latest design, but will also be able to gain some better idea of what the World War I Memorial commemorates.

The Committee of 100 urges the National Capital Planning Commission to consider both the physical aspects of the latest design but also how the symbolic message of World War I will be conveyed. We do not believe that information about World War I is adequately provided in the existing design.

Thank you for considering our comments.

Respectfully submitted,



Stephen A. Hansen, Chair

cc: Patricia Trap, Acting Superintendent, National Mall and Memorial Parks, National Park Service
Thomas Luebke, Secretary -- U.S. Commission of Fine Arts
Eric Shaw, Director -- D.C. Office of Planning
David Maloney--State Historic Preservation Officer for the District of Columbia
Edwin Fountain – World War I Centennial Commission
Claire Sale -- AECOM