

U. S. COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS

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27 July 2017

Dear Mr. Vogel:

In its meeting of 20 July, the Commission of Fine Arts reviewed a site selection presentation on two potential locations for the proposed National Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial. The Commission strongly affirmed its support for a memorial to commemorate this consequential military conflict but did not approve either of the sites presented.

The Commission members emphasized the importance of finding an appropriate site for this memorial, which would honor the lives of nearly four hundred volunteer servicemen and servicewomen, and which would make visible their sacrifice for the nation. They found that both proposed sites are encumbered by significant challenges, and neither appears suitable for the memorial. They commented that the site selection process seems to have been driven by the primary goal of locating the memorial adjacent to an existing monument such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or the Arlington Memorial Bridge, as well as by the assumption that an expansive, landscape-based typology is necessary for the design of the memorial itself. They observed that the intended scale of the memorial is large, constraining the possible choice of sites, and that a more compact design with a sculptural approach could be accommodated in many more potential locations. They advised the project team to consider the real experience of visiting the future memorial—not merely the physical form of its commemorative elements, but the broader setting which is affected by such factors as noise, accessibility, shade, and landscape character.

The Commission members commented on the specific shortcomings of both sites, one within the George Washington Memorial Parkway south of Memorial Circle on Columbia Island, and the other within West Potomac Park at the southwest corner of Constitution Avenue and 23rd Street, NW. They commented that the Memorial Circle site is layered with many other commemorative associations: as the original threshold to the parkway dedicated to President George Washington and connecting to his home at Mount Vernon; as part of an extended program of beautification and parkland development led by Lady Bird Johnson; and—most significantly—as a symbolic axis of reconciliation between the northern and southern states after the Civil War, marked by the majestic structure of Memorial Bridge crossing from the Lincoln Memorial to Columbia Island, with a vista extending upward to Arlington National Cemetery. They found that a site less laden with established commemorative meaning would provide a better setting for the Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial. For the alternative at Constitution Avenue, they observed the substantial existing challenges of this site, which is compromised by heavy automobile traffic, airplane noise, planned flood control and levee construction, and an extensive storm sewer infrastructure project. Given these many unresolved issues, they concluded that the site would require nearly insurmountable efforts to render it a dignified setting for the memorial, involving concerted public initiatives to address these challenges and reconceive this area comprehensively to serve multiple and disparate civic needs.

While acknowledging the advantages of literal adjacency to other memorials with a military theme, the Commission members emphasized the potential for different ways of creating

thematic connections, which could serve as the basis for the siting and design of this memorial. They recommended anticipating the very likely accommodation of many new war memorials in the coming decades—for such conflicts as the Gulf War, the Iraq War, the Afghanistan War, the Global War on Terrorism, and others we have yet to imagine—and that a more comprehensive approach is needed rather than piecemeal decision-making for individual commemorative works. They raised the general concern that the proliferation of related national war memorials in West Potomac Park—in addition to the existing memorials to the Vietnam, Korean, and Second World Wars—would effectively turn the aspirational landscape of the National Mall west of the Washington Monument into an area of military commemoration, as if an extension of Arlington National Cemetery, overwhelming its intended purpose as a place of civic prospect.

In conclusion, the Commission encouraged further study of potential sites that are less constrained by size and adjacency to existing commemorative features, to be presented in a new submission; this presentation should also include analysis by historians of the social and geopolitical significance of Desert Storm and Desert Shield in addition to their military importance. As always, the staff is available to assist you with the next submission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Luebke', written in a cursive style.

Thomas E. Luebke, FAIA
Secretary

Robert Vogel, Regional Director
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cc: Scott Stump, National Desert Storm Memorial Association
Alan Harwood, AECOM
Marcel Acosta, National Capital Planning Commission