

World War I Memorial Section 106 Consulting Parties Meeting

December 16, 2015

9:00 a.m.

U.S. Commission of Fine Arts

Attendees: Peter May, Glenn DeMarr (National Park Service-National Capital Region); Catherine Dewey, Mike Commisso, Melissa Mertz, Peter Lonsway (National Park Service-National Mall and Memorial Parks); Jennifer Hirsch, Elizabeth Miller, Matt Flis (National Capital Planning Commission); Thomas Luebke, Sarah Batcheler, and Frederick Lindstrom (U.S. Commission of Fine Arts); Edwin Fountain, Roger Lewis, Dale Archer, Don Stastny, Jennifer Mannhard (WWI Centennial Commission); David Maloney, Andrew Lewis (District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office); Patricia Zingsheim (District Office of Planning); Jeff Winstel (Washington Area Metropolitan Transit Authority); Jo-Ann Neuhaus (Penn Quarter Neighborhood Association); Rebecca Miller (DC Preservation League); Alex Block (Downtown BID); Elizabeth Merritt (National Trust for Historic Preservation); Charles Birnbaum, Nord Wennerstrom, Scott Craver (Cultural Landscape Foundation); Dena Kennett (American Society of Landscape Architects); Darwina Neal; Greg Sarkesian (Big Star Aquatics Construction); Alan Harwood, Claire Sale (AECOM)

Introduction

Everybody went around the room and introduced themselves.

Presentation

Undertaking

Alan Harwood (AECOM) provided a review of the undertaking and the authorizing legislation. He also described the documentation of historic resources at the site completed to date, and added that a determination of eligibility (DOE) is underway.

Site History

Claire Sale (AECOM) reviewed the history of the site by describing its use as a development site, park, federal office building, and memorial site, including the existing configuration.

Area of Potential Effect

Claire presented the Draft Area of Potential Effect (APE). Charles Birnbaum (Cultural Landscape Foundation) asked how the APE was determined and if the boundary was intended to indicate potential visual impacts. He expressed particular interest in the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site (NHS) District, stating that portions of the District are outside the APE borders. Claire responded that yes, the boundaries are intended to reflect visual impacts, and that the APE could be altered to reflect the boundaries of the Pennsylvania Avenue NHS District. Catherine Dewey (National Park Service-National Mall and Memorial Parks) indicated that her office would review the APE. Andrew Lewis (DC Historic Preservation Office) suggested that dashed lines could be used to reflect the visual influences beyond the APE boundary.

Design Considerations

Alan presented an analysis of the site, including the topography, view corridors, pedestrian pathways, and other features of the site. He reviewed the design challenges of the park, including the need to balance memorial purposes with park functions, and the guidance provided to the design competitors.

Review of Finalists' Designs

Roger Lewis (World War I Centennial Commission) reviewed the five designs of the competition finalists. He noted that the images shown reflect submissions received on December 7, 2015 and are a progression from the original design submitted during the summer of 2015. The designs remove most of the existing Pershing Park features, stating that the finalists have largely treated the site as a tabula rasa. He noted that almost none of the 350 submissions retained the berms.

An American Family Portrait

Roger noted that the overall design of this entry has changed by creating more distinct precincts, using fewer portraits, expanding the green space (although a considerable amount of hardscape remains), and organizing the content and circulation in a more rational way. The Pershing Memorial elements are the only items retained from the existing park. Andrew asked about changes to the berms, to which Roger answered that almost none of the submissions kept the berms.

Greg Sarkesian (Big Star Aquatics Construction) asked if the design includes a water feature. Roger responded that this design does not.

Peter May (National Park Service-National Capital Region) noted that the changes included moving the portraits out of the walkways.

Darwina Neal asked about the materials covering the in-ground images. Roger responded that they would be of glass.

Grotto of Remembrance

Roger described the concept as to be of the time of World War I. He noted that the overall concept has changed little. The principal access point is from the south. A figural space occupies the center, but is oriented to the north.

Jo-Ann Neuhaus asked about the height of the tower. The exact height was not known by attendees, but is estimated to be approximately 70-80 feet. She also asked how far the tower is from the Pennsylvania Avenue right-of-way. Again, attendees did not know exactly, but estimated approximately 70 feet.

Patricia Zingsheim asked about the interpretive elements. Roger said that text and artwork will be around the grotto. Patricia also asked if one can walk into the site from the south, which Roger confirmed.

Jo-Ann asked if the topiary is above the colonnade, which Roger confirmed.

Greg asked if there is a water feature. The grotto does include a water feature and an eternal flame.

Darwina noted that the trees above the loggia are pollarded, and asked if one can walk underneath them. The design team stated that they are above the loggia, and cannot be walked among.

Heroes' Green

Roger described the walls, plaza, and lawn included as part of the design. The design removes most of the existing Pershing Park features, but builds upon the southwest berm of the park to make it higher than existing conditions. The eastern lawn contains the Pershing statue and has a relationship with Freedom Plaza. He noted that the access points are from the four corners of the site. He stated that the interpretive experience would be from the walls along the pathway.

Jo-Ann asked the height of the walls. Attendees did not know the exact height, but would check.

Darwina noted that an extensive flight of stairs is located at the southwest entrance to the site and asked if the site is considered universally accessible. Roger noted that the only steps are at the southwest, while the other three entrances are at-grade. He explained that the design team wanted a monumental arrival experience.

Greg asked if there was a water feature, to which the answer was yes.

Charles asked if people would be meant to walk onto the berms. Because they contain groundcover rather than grass, it is anticipated that it would not be walked on. He also noted that the site does not seem to be accessible, and asked how one would travel between the southeast and northwest corners of the site. Jennifer Mannhard (World War I Centennial Commission) stated people would need to travel the circuitous routes of the pathways.

Plaza to a Forgotten War

Roger described the design, which includes a series of lights through fiber-optic cable and pylons for interpretation. The diagonal orientation was noted, as was the lack of a water feature. He also stated that the Pershing statue and walls remain in essentially their existing location. Otherwise, the park contains few of the existing park elements. The park offers an opportunity for active recreation and for other activities, such as eating lunch.

Darwina asked how the topographic change from north to south was addressed. The plaza has a gradual slope to address this change, removing the existing stairs. She also asked about the reference to poppies. Jennifer said that they would be one part of seasonal vegetation at the site.

Weight of Sacrifice

Roger introduced this design as the one that comes the closest to preserving the existing site design, but said that it still alters the topography. He also said that it moved the Pershing Memorial.

Andrew asked if the interpretation was primarily bas relief. Jennifer described the walls and that parts are text, while others are bas relief.

Tom Luebke (U.S. Commission of Fine Arts) asked about the height of the walls. The images show that at the main lawn, the wall would be approximately waist-high, while at the tallest point of the lawn's perimeter, the height would be taller than an average person.

Next Steps

Alan reviewed the next steps involved in the process, which include the selection of a design by the jury and the World War I Centennial Commission, and the next Section 106 meeting.

Discussion

Jo-Ann asked if the Design Oversight Committee (DOC) is a separate organization from the jury. The World War I Centennial Commission responded that the DOC is made up of the various agency staff that will review the project. Jo-Ann asked if it would be possible to choose nothing, and Edwin responded that anything is possible.

David Maloney (DC State Historic Preservation Office) asked if the jury considered selecting something that kept the park, as this would help create alternatives that include a preservation focus. He also said that the Section 106 process is about preservation. He said that there is no preservation option and asked what the group is supposed to do.

Charles noted that the schedule is problematic, given that the DOE has not yet been conducted. Peter said that the NPS interprets “enhance” as allowing significant flexibility. The NPS will go through the Section 106 process, and determine what changes to the site make sense. Tom said that the site presents significant challenges due to its potential need for preservation. David said that if the design is selected before the DOE, it makes it more challenging for the design team.

Edwin said that the finalists illustrate the challenges of conducting an open design competition in parallel with the Section 106 process. The competition manual advised a range of approaches, from preservation to demolition. Approximately 360 designs were submitted, and approximately 15 preserved the bones of the existing park design. The jury did not believe those 15 designs satisfied the goals of the project.

Edwin stated that the Commission consulted agencies prior to the Congressional designation of Pershing Park as the World War I Memorial site. He said that if he had been explicitly told that a preservation option was required, he would have done so. He noted that the fundraising window for the Memorial is limited with the 100th anniversary of the end of the war in 2018 and the sunset of the Commission in 2019.

Elizabeth Merritt (National Trust for Historic Preservation) asked if it would be possible for the jury to not select a design. Edwin responded that the Commission makes the final selection, and the Commission could reject the designs. Peter noted that the Commission is looking at the broader picture, rather than just the design. Edwin said that if the Commission chose simply to alter the existing memorial, it would leave the rest of the park in its current condition.

David stated that the standard preservation approach is to identify features and keep the things that are most important. Each designer should be asked the following question: What would you do to keep the historic character of the site?

Elizabeth Miller (National Capital Planning Commission) said that the DOC encouraged designers to incorporate their designs into the existing fabric of the site. Some responded, while others did not. One question is whether the Commission is selecting a designer or a design. Edwin commented that the Commission is selecting a designer based on a design concept. He stated that the Commission would not submit the plans to approval agencies until the design has evolved and the determination of eligibility for listing in the National Register has been completed.

Peter stated that the NPS knew that Pershing Park had the potential for eligibility, and therefore assumed that the site would be eligible. He further commented that he was unsure how this initial information was communicated.

Charles followed up stating that he had reached out to the WWI Commission prior to the design competition. Charles said that the 2007 Pennsylvania Avenue NHS National Register nomination did not include Pershing Park, and therefore it was not identified as an issue in that document. And if the existing water feature is considered a problem to maintain, how can the designs include new water features? Peter said that regarding the fountain, NPS gives some guidance against them because NPS cannot consistently maintain them.

Edwin outlined the timeframe for commissioning and receiving the DOE, stating that a preliminary draft would be ready in April 2016. Numerous parties suggested that this was a very long time, noting that the firm retained has previously conducted research on Pennsylvania Avenue and therefore have the historic context. The parties requested a preliminary determination of significance. Peter suggested that this would be a good idea.

Matt Flis (National Capital Planning Commission) asked if this discussion would be conveyed to the jury. Edwin responded that it would, although the exact method was unknown.

Jo-Ann said that the Willard Hotel should be considered in the development of the plans.

Conclusion

Peter closed the meeting by thanking the participants and stating that he welcomed the feedback. He is optimistic that a way forward can be identified.