

Testimony of Justin Shubow, President, The National Civic Art Society

Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the
House Committee on Natural Resources

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Grijalva, members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for inviting the National Civic Art Society to speak today. As an educational nonprofit dedicated to the classical and humanistic tradition in public art and architecture, we believe that our most important monuments play an essential role in defining our national identity and crystallizing our historic memory. Civic art and architecture is the mirror in which the civilization sees itself.

One year ago it was conventional wisdom that the design of the Eisenhower Memorial was a done deal, a fait accompli soon to be cemented with quite real facts on the ground. But what has been groundbreaking is the surge of attention from Congress and the public. The more they have dug and discovered, the more they have got behind the wrecking ball aimed at Frank Gehry's avant-garde design—a design that has turned out to be more fragile than anyone could have imagined.

How did we get to this point? Any memorial competition is only as good as its professional adviser. In this case, that adviser was Daniel Feil. The Eisenhower Commission hired Mr. Feil as its executive architect and appointed him its agent to run the design competition. Mr. Feil is an urban planner who is best known for working on mega-projects such as Reagan National Airport. To the best of our knowledge, he has never worked on a memorial.

Mr. Feil chose to run the competition according to the General Service Administration's Design Excellence Program. This was a fundamental mistake since that program was created to select licensed architects for federal office buildings and courthouses. It was never intended for memorials. The very creator of Design Excellence, former GSA chief architect Edward Feiner, strongly urged Mr. Feil not to use the program for the Eisenhower Memorial.

The decision to use Design Excellence represents an utter reversal of our tradition of competitions for national monuments and memorials. Whereas formerly we held competitions of designs, Mr. Feil ran a competition of designers. At no point in the competition was an entrant required to submit an actual proposal for the memorial. Instead the emphasis was on the entrants' portfolio, résumé, and reputation—all factors that favor the architectural elite. While this might be appropriate for hiring an architect to design a federal office building, it makes no sense for a

memorial. One does not need to be a licensed architect to come up with a brilliant design for a memorial. One can be a student, a sculptor, an amateur. When Maya Lin won the open, blindly reviewed competition for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, she was an unknown college student. A present-day Maya Lin could not even have entered the Eisenhower competition, let alone won.

Not only was the competition limited to licensed architects with substantial portfolios, it was a closed competition that solicited only 44 entries. This is hundreds fewer than the number of entries in open competitions for previous national memorials. It was also a secretive process. To this day we do not know the identities of all the entrants, we have never seen what Mr. Gehry submitted, and we do not know who sat on the evaluation board.

The former chief architect of GSA is not the only distinguished opponent of the competition. Another is Paul Spreiregen, who is arguably the leading expert on design competitions, and who literally wrote the book on the subject. Mr. Spreiregen served as an adviser for design competitions in Washington, D.C., including the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the World Bank Headquarters. He has vociferously objected to the Eisenhower competition. He wrote in the *Washington Post*, “Why weren’t all American designers given the opportunity to submit proposals for the Eisenhower memorial? The method for doing that is a very well-organized and well-managed open-design competition. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Pentagon 9/11 Memorial, the 9/11 Memorial in New York City and the Gateway Arch in St. Louis are ample evidence of the reliability of open-design competitions. The design process for the Eisenhower memorial should have been open to all. It still can be, if the Gehry design is rejected.”

In the 1990s, when the commission overseeing the National World War II Memorial competition held a closed competition nearly identical to that in this case, there was widespread public outcry and the original competition was scrapped in favor of an open one. The Eisenhower competition has ended up in exactly the same situation. Failing to understand the past, the Eisenhower Commission was condemned to repeat it.

It is true that Robert Ivy, CEO of the American Institute of Architects, submitted a letter to this Subcommittee announcing that the trade organization opposes the proposed bill. The letter says that AIA neither opposes nor supports the design, but rather asserts that the process that chose it should not be overturned. (Note that the letter does not disclose that Mr. Ivy was one of the members of the evaluation board that selected Frank Gehry as the designer).

How ironic is it, then, that the guidelines in AIA’s own *Handbook of Architectural Design Competitions* would strongly encourage the competition for a project of national importance to be an open, blindly reviewed process in which entries are publicly displayed. The actual competition violated all of these guidelines. To quote the handbook:

Open competitions are appropriate under the following circumstances:

- The nature of the project suggests that all architects have an equal opportunity to be selected on the basis of design merit
- The project requires the widest exploration of potential solutions made possible by an open competition

[...]

Exhibitions [of entries] provide a fine opportunity to stimulate public consideration of architectural design. They also help to stimulate the competitive spirit of participants. Knowing that their work will be displayed along with that of their peers can be a stimulus to competitors. For all these reasons, as full a presentation as possible of the submissions should be attempted.

Note that the AIA handbook was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and thus the guidelines have even wider scope than the interests of the trade association.

The result of the poorly run, undemocratic Eisenhower Memorial competition was the bizarre choice of Frank Gehry, an architect known for his deconstructionist style, project-cost overruns, and prior design flaws. In the 1990s, before Design Excellence came into existence, Mr. Gehry said, “My name was put up for a courthouse, and the General Services Administration that runs the government buildings just laughed at the idea.” On another occasion he said, “The American government won’t even hire me to do anything. In fact we submit for courthouses every once in a while, and we get funny letters back, and people on the selection committee, the GSA guys, just guffaw to think of someone like me doing the project.”

As one might expect, his Eisenhower design’s style, form, materials, content, scale, and scope are totally anathema to and discordant with the National Mall and the Monumental Core. Indeed, Gehry has repeatedly stated his rejection of harmony as a principle of architecture and urban planning. Furthermore, his incredibly expensive Memorial is ugly and offensive to the eye according to the standards of the L’Enfant and McMillan Plans as well as traditional and current public standards of beauty. The largest element of the Memorial’s design is a gargantuan “tapestry” of industrial steel cables. The screen is larger than the iconic Hollywood sign in Los Angeles. Viewed close up, the coiled steel resembles the snakes on Medusa’s head. We fear that the tapestry would come to be called the “iron curtain.”

The main “tapestry” and two smaller ones nearby are supported by ten enormous pillars (so-called “columns”) 80-feet tall and 11-to-12-feet in diameter. The towers are so large that Gehry has admitted, “They are almost buildings. . . . [T]hey are huge in this scheme. So they are more like buildings.” The oppressively sized pillars would make visitors feel like ants.

Opponents of the highly unpopular design include the entire Eisenhower family along with George Will, David Brooks, David Frum, Ross Douthat, George Weigel, Pulitzer Prize-winner David Shribman, and former NEH Director Bruce Cole. Newspapers that have come out against it include the New York Post, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, the Topeka Capital-Journal, the Washington Examiner, and the Kearney Hub (of Nebraska). Articles in opposition have appeared in The New Republic, the Wichita Eagle, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, National Review, the Weekly Standard, the Washington Post, the Baltimore Sun, the Boston Globe, Human Events, Foreign Policy magazine, and many more.

Opposition has come from across the political spectrum, and from architects and critics both congenial and opposed to Modernist architecture. As a supplement to our testimony, we have included an index of over 70 selected articles, editorials, and letters critical of the Eisenhower Memorial. An 190-page compilation of those articles can be found at our website, www.civicart.org.

In addition to the criticism of Gehry's design, the durability of the experimental structure—a cable wire mesh held in tension between the giant pillars—has been called into question by the government's materials experts. In the most recent technical report submitted to the National Capital Planning Commission, the Department of the Army's expert recommended that an identical set of duplicate tapestries be built to serve as enormous spare parts when the tapestry becomes degraded or damaged. This would entail spending tens of millions of dollars beyond the \$142 million the Memorial is already estimated to cost. The government's experts have even warned of the possibility of dangerous snow and ice falling on visitors.

In short, the Memorial design and process have been wrong in their aesthetics, wrong in their economics, and wrong in their physics. And perhaps Representative Darrell Issa's House Oversight investigation will find that the process was wrong in its ethics.

Congress now has no choice but to go back to the drawing board and pass a bill to ensure that President Eisenhower gets the Memorial he deserves. We must keep in mind that the client here is not the congressional Eisenhower Commission but the Congress that created it. Ultimately, however, the client is the American people. Nothing could be more democratic than an open competition that provides opportunity for comment from both Congress and the public.

Sadly, the bill under discussion today must make explicit what used to be assumed without question. Consider the act creating Flight 93 National Memorial, which commemorates the flight's passengers and crew. Congress explicitly stated "For the purposes of this Act, the terrorists on United Airlines Flight 93 on September 11, 2001, shall not be considered passengers or crew of that flight." That Congress was felt the need to insert this language shows that something has gone terribly awry among the artistic and architectural elite.

What then are the universal requirements of a monument? Monuments are civic art that cause us to solemnly reflect on who we are and what we value. They are heroic-sized, timeless, and possess grandeur. They present an ideal we aspire to rather than warts-and-all reality. Sacred and transcendent, they inspire instead of demoralizing us. They must honor, not merely remember their subjects. They must be made of noble materials—such as marble and bronze—that have proven their durability over millennia, not industrial materials such as steel and PVC piping. Monuments are permanent and must appear permanent, unlike a scrim or a shroud. Monuments ought to be clear and unequivocal in their meaning: They should evince a few simple ideas in a way that is graspable by ordinary Americans. They must be legible without a guide or key, and certainly without a visitor center or iPad. Monuments speak to us even without signage. You can be inspired by a monument even if you do not know who is represented or what that person did. Monuments are not museums and they should not try to tell stories. They are not inkblots that leave things to the interpretation of the visitor. Monuments are statements, not question marks. Maya Lin rightly said that her intentionally ambiguous Vietnam Memorial is an “antimonument.”

In addition to satisfying all of these requirements, the Eisenhower Memorial must continue our Founder’s classical vision for the nation’s capital as embodied in the L’Enfant and McMillan Plans and the design of our core buildings of government. The memorial must harmonize with the best of our tradition of presidential memorials, the National Mall, and the Monumental Core. There is no better way to honor Eisenhower the general, the president, and the man than in the unmistakably American idiom that the American people love and cherish.

A traditional man of old-fashioned virtue, President Eisenhower disdained Modernist art and architecture, which he did not believe represented the taste and values of the American people. He warned in 1962, “We see our very art forms so changed that we seem to have forgotten the works of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. . . . What has happened to our concept of beauty and decency and morality?”

America can and will build Eisenhower a monument that will prove his fears unfounded. The talent is there. Now is the time to find it.