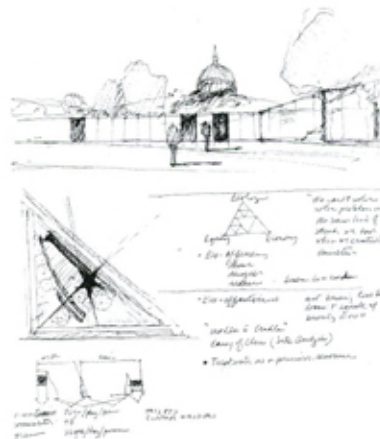
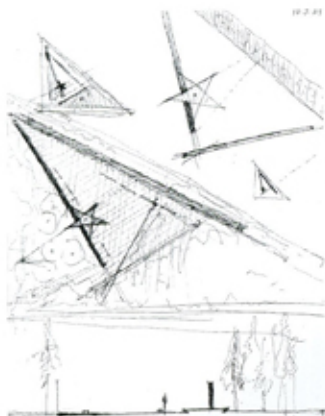


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A Living Memorial

A multidisciplinary design team gives voice to disabled veterans of the past, but also honors those who are still living with the effects of war.

BY PAT MATSON KNAPP



By Washington standards, the nascent American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial has been a fast-track project. Conventional wisdom says it takes an average of 17 years to navigate the labyrinthine process required to build a federal memorial. Congressional approvals, agency coordination, code compliance, security issues, and arduous design reviews by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts are just a few of the necessary steps along the path.

In 1998 the Disabled Veterans LIFE Memorial Foundation was created to raise funds for a new memorial dedicated to the 3 million American veterans who live with the disabilities they suffered while serving their country. If all goes as planned, the idea conceived by Florida philanthropist Lois Pope will be brought to fruition on a site near the U.S. Capitol in 2011 and the memorial will be dedicated in 2012, just 14 years later.

The memorial's design is the vision of Michael Vergason Landscape Architects Ltd. (Alexandria, Va.), which in 2003 won the foundation's competition for the memorial design. Vergason and the foundation staff are working with a multidisciplinary team that includes architects Shalom Baranes Associates (Washington, D.C.), public artist Larry Kirkland (Washington, D.C.), and environmental graphic design firm Cloud Gehshan (Philadelphia).

Universal appeal

To understand the challenges of giving form and materiality to a memorial, it's important to understand the diversity of the interest groups involved.

The American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial will honor the 3 million living disabled veterans as well as those from previous and future wars and conflicts. In addition, it represents 50-plus veterans groups, from high-profile organizations such as the Disabled American Veterans, American Legion, and VFW, to smaller groups representing individual conflicts. It will also represent a wide array of disabilities, from those that are visible to those whose effects aren't obvious to others. The Iraq War, for example, has been characterized by injuries such as limb amputations and traumatic brain injuries. Post-traumatic stress and other mental disabilities suffered as a result of war are now far outnumbering the more physically obvious injuries.

"Our paramount objective has always been that ALL veterans must be able to see themselves reflected in this memorial," says Rick Fenstermacher, COO of the Disabled Veterans LIFE Memorial Foundation. So just as the memorial design has had to earn the approval of a host of stakeholders in Washington, it also has been developed in partnership with the veterans' groups.

Of course, the memorial's largest audience will be the millions of visitors who are not disabled veterans, or their family members or friends.

"Disability as a topic creates a fairly high level of discomfort for the world that doesn't live it directly," says Michael Vergason. "In some ways it's psychologically more difficult for people who are outside it than for those actually engaged with it."

Balancing the needs of those two audiences—creating a memorial that is neither too literal nor too abstract—was the project's unspoken imperative.

Living memorial

Vergason's initial concept was driven strongly by the physicality of the site, a wedge-shaped, almost 2-acre property at the southeast corner of the National Mall, about ¼ mile from—and importantly, in full view of—the U.S. Capitol.

"If there's a single aspect of the site that drove the design and continues to, it's the strong visual connection to the Capitol," says Vergason. "The events that happen there have direct impact on the quality of disabled veterans' lives."



In spite of the changes that have been made to Vergason's original concept over the years, as well as changes to the site itself in response to security concerns, it retains the essence his team proposed: a living memorial that changes daily and with the seasons, provides a gathering place for veterans, and is a permanent expression of the country's gratitude for their service and sacrifices.

The concept has evolved during seven years of collaboration, eight design reviews by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, three hearings before the National Capital Planning Commission, and ongoing coordination with the National Park Service (the memorial's landlord), the U.S. Access Board, the Architect of the Capitol, and numerous other stakeholders. The final design was approved by the Commission of Fine Arts last July.

Strength and vulnerability

Arriving through the northern entrance off the National Mall, most visitors will first encounter the memorial's primary focal point: a star-shaped fountain with an eternal flame hovering over its center. The points of the star represent the five branches of the U.S. military, and water from the fountain spills into a large reflecting pool bordered by ginkgo and bald cypress trees.

"The star is the public 'thank you,' the place of ceremony and celebration," says Beata Corcoran, Vergason project coordinator. From the fountain, visitors will move along the water's edge to the "Wall of Gratitude," a 200-ft-long white granite wall that will bear the name of the memorial in large V-cut letters carved into the granite. Quotations from Presidents Washington and Eisenhower will be inscribed on the wall in smaller lettering, and the western entrance, which bisects the wall, will also bear the memorial's name.

At the southern end of the triangle, a third major element will feature the voices of disabled veterans themselves. Three staggered walls consisting of a total of 48 laminated glass panels, each 8.5-ft. high by 4-ft. wide, will include etched quotations, photographic images, and four bronze sculptured silhouettes.

Opposite top: Early sketches for the memorial featured the star as a central icon and gathering place.

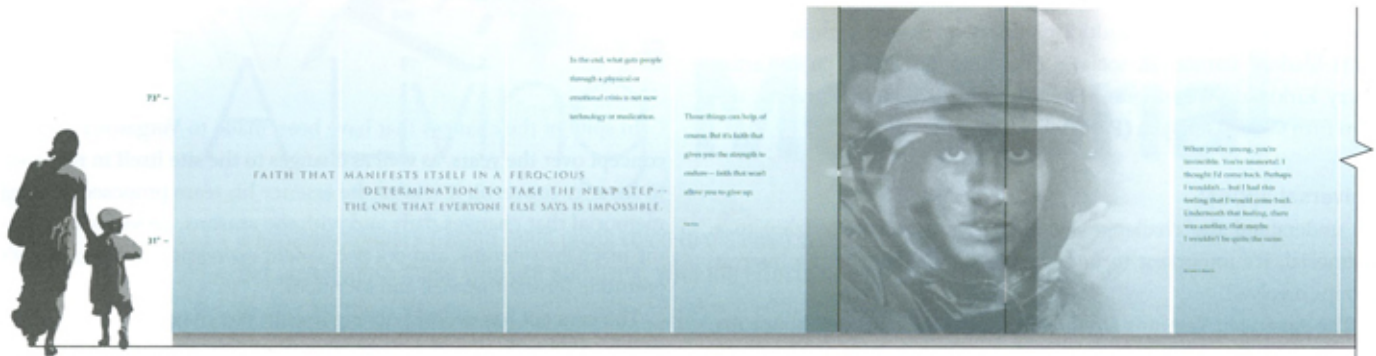
Opposite: The Americans Disabled for Life Memorial will feature a star-shaped fountain with an eternal flame hovering over its center. The five points of the star represent the branches of the U.S. military.

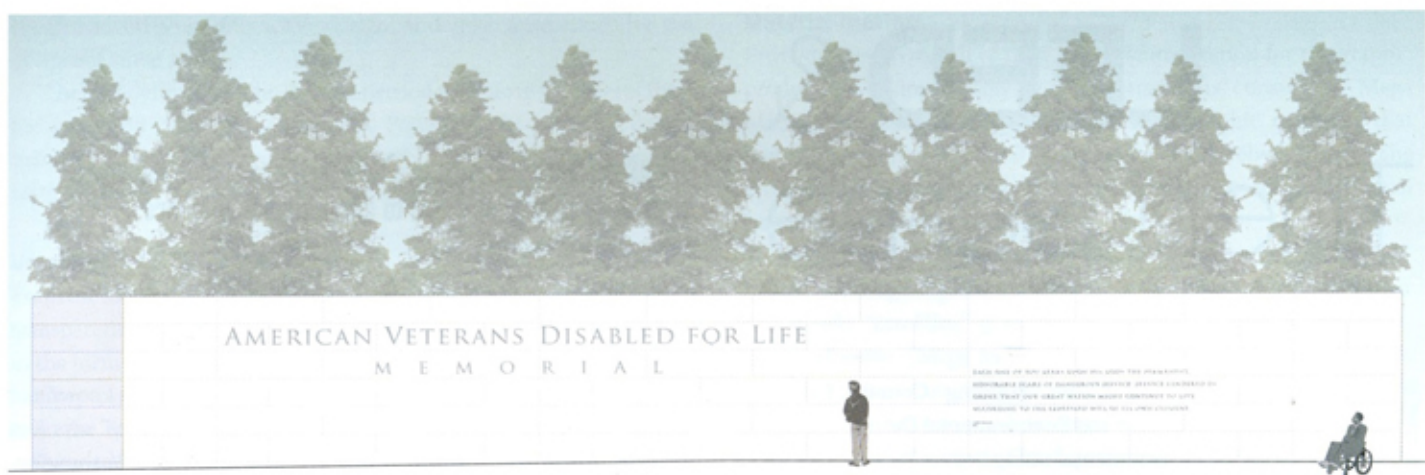
Above: The final design retains the star as a focal point, but adds a 200-ft. granite "Wall of Gratitude" (left) and three staggered glass walls (bottom) that will carry the memorial's interpretive message.

Right and bottom: Mock-ups helped members of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts visualize how the bronze silhouettes would integrate with the laminated glass panels. Though not the first use of glass on a Washington memorial, the panels' scale and integration with the bronze cutouts are unprecedented.

Middle: Three staggered glass walls, each containing laminated panels 8.5-ft. high by 4-ft.-wide, will broadcast the "voices" of disabled veterans via inscribed quotations, bronze silhouettes, and powerful photographic images.

Opposite: V-cut letters incised by hand into the 200-ft.-long, white granite "Wall of Gratitude" will formally identify the memorial. Cloud Gehshan chose Trajan type for the memorial name, Palatino for quotations, and Myriad for attributions.





"Light and shadow interacting with the translucent glass and bronze at various times of the day will bring the panels to life and make for a very dramatic, intimate experience," says public artist Larry Kirkland. After months of exploring how to integrate the glass panels with three-dimensional elements, "We realized we could create both complementary and contrasting images and shadows by framing the glass with inverted bronze silhouettes adjacent to the glass, so that when light comes in, the shapes of the cutouts are projected onto the translucent glass."

The materials palette—stone, glass, and bronze—was chosen not only for its visual connection to other Washington memorials, but for its juxtaposition of solidity and transparency, strength and vulnerability.

Telling their stories

Cloud Gehshan was brought on to the team to develop the interpretive approach and content for the memorial—essentially to determine how best to tell the veterans' stories. This included research and content development, content design and integration, materials research and development, and presentations to the CFA, NCPC, and other groups.

Cloud Gehshan developed the interpretive framework and worked with History Associates, which catalogued the voices, experiences, and memories of disabled veterans across all wars. Early on, says firm principal Jerome Cloud, "We realized that while disabled veterans' experiences are as unique and varied as the individuals involved, the best approach to telling their *collective* story was to focus on the commonalities." So the team organized content by four journey stages: 1) Pride of Serving, 2) Trauma of Injury, 3) Challenge of Healing, and 4) Discovery of Purpose.

Cloud saw Vergason's choice of glass as "a material of truth, an instrument of disclosure and transparency. We felt glass could liberate and illuminate the veterans' voices and escape the rigid, disciplinary confines of masonry."

The team gathered more than 700 soldiers' accounts and about the same number of photographs, researched them for historical context, and verified them. Cloud, Corcoran, and Kirkland distilled the quotations down to 80, from which the foundation selected 18. Just six photo images were chosen to be superscaled and encased within the glass walls.

The final quotations and images were selected for their universal resonance and timelessness, and could represent any war. One photograph that Kirkland calls "The Thousand-Yard Stare" is a close-up of a weary young soldier, eyes glazed over from the exhaustion and stress of combat as he scouts the field around him. "If you have the expertise, you could probably tell from his helmet around what time he was fighting. But otherwise, it's a classic, iconic scene of war."

AMERICAN VETERANS DISABLED FOR LIFE MEMORIAL

Client: Disabled Veterans LIFE Memorial Foundation

Location: Washington, D.C.

Design Team: Michael Vergason Landscape Architects Ltd. Michael Vergason (principal in charge), Doug Hayes (senior associate), Beata Corcoran (project coordinator)

Cloud Gehshan Associates, Jerome Cloud (principal in charge); Ian Goldberg (senior designer); Matt Cavalier, Steve Ricci (designers); Larry Kirkland Studios, Larry Kirkland (artist/sculptor); Shalom Baranes Associates; History Associates, James H. Lide (senior historian)

Images: Michael Vergason Landscape Architects, Cloud Gehshan, Richard C. Latoff (photos)

The interpretive concept was challenging to communicate to the Commission of Fine Arts, but finally, the team created mock-ups to demonstrate how the bronze and glass elements would be integrated and how light would interact with the panels. In the final versions, images will reside between layers of glass, while text will likely be inscribed on various layers of the glass.

A model of accessibility

One of the project goals was to promote the highest possible accessibility to the site and interpretive media, and to ensure that people with mobility and visual disabilities have a meaningful experience there. Unlike most other Washington memorials, it will be accessible by bus and car, accommodating six disabled parking spaces and a drop-off lane for up to three buses at a time. Braille signage will be coordinated with the National Park Services' ongoing signage program for the National Mall. The team is also exploring alternative interpretive media, such as cell-phone tours. The foundation's website includes a virtual tour of the memorial.

Bringing it home

Design development on the \$86 million, privately funded project is complete, and the next phase is construction documentation, says the foundation's project executive, Barry Owenby.

"We still have final approvals from the Park Service and the NCPC to go, and we hope to achieve those by late spring this year," adds Owenby. If all goes as scheduled, roadwork around the site will be completed by the end of 2010, and ground could be broken as early as December 2010. Construction will take about 12 months.

Owenby's optimism is tempered by experience—he was also project executive for the National World War II Memorial and knows well how schedules can be disrupted. But he believes that by Veterans Day 2011 or Memorial Day 2012, the memorial will be complete—and America's disabled veterans will finally have a place to gather, remember, and be honored for their service to country. X