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Murdoch answers questions about Flight 93 Memorial Design

(Editor's Note: Paul Murdoch, the lead designer for the Flight 93 National Memorial, answered the following questions about the design of the Memorial for the readers of the Daily American)

Q: Please tell us about your professional background.



A: I started my own firm 17 years ago, after working for two different American Institute of Architects Gold Medalists, Arthur Erickson and Charles Moore, for eight years in Los Angeles and for two years in Philadelphia prior to that.

I am a Member of the American Institute of Architects and the US Green Building Council.

Q: What types of other projects have you designed?

A: Our work is design oriented and includes a wide range of project types: Public and academic libraries, university learning centers, gymnasiums, a city hall for South Los Angeles, laboratories, offices and custom homes. We have a long history of policy advocacy for and design of environmentally responsible architecture.

With Charles Moore I worked on the competition-winning design of the Beverly Hills Civic Center. With Arthur Erickson I designed major civic, transportation, university and research facilities, and custom homes.

Q: Please explain the collaborative process of the design team.

A: In Stage 1 of the competition we established the site design concept and design of the key memorial features.

In Stage 2, we assembled a professional team with particular expertise that could help us develop the design and carry it forward if selected. Since the design is a memorial landscape, our primary collaborator has been Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects with whom we share credit for the selected competition design.

Currently under contract with the National Park Service (NPS), our firm takes the lead in design to ensure the memorial design remains consistent with our vision. We also manage the consultant team to optimize full collaboration among the team.

Q: What was the inspiration for the original design?

A: The heroism of the 40 passengers and crew members, as expressed by the mission statement and preamble: "a common field one day, a field of honor forever," and the qualities of the site, in particular its scale, severity and serenity.

We wanted to use those site qualities for the memorial expression: Its open, sweeping scale for heroism; severity to recognize the violent struggle and sacrifice for freedom; and serenity as appropriate for the final resting place of the 40 heroes.

Q: What sort of feeling or statement do you hope it will convey?

A: I hope visitors will feel awe and reverence.

In an era characterized by much cynicism, uncertainty and doubt, the heroic, generous actions of 40 citizens can and should serve as a valuable touchstone for all Americans. I hope this memorial will convey that.

Q: Would you explain each element of the design, starting with what people will see when they come in to the site.

A: The first memorial feature visitors will see is the Tower of Voices, nearly 100 feet tall, close to the entrance off Route 30. In what is now an open field, it will be surrounded by rings of white pine trees that will resonate out from the tower, like sound waves, and create a more intimate space for the visitors to listen to 40 commemorative wind chimes in the tower.

From there, visitors will drive, bike or walk about two miles through the old mining property to the large space known as the bowl, where most of the memorial features will occur. The main entrance to the bowl will be a walkway, aligned with the flight path, through two high walls framing the visitors' first view of the crash site. Between these walls will be the visitor facility. Beyond will be a circular, tree-lined walkway and 40 memorial groves that formally commemorate the bowl as a field of honor. The walkway will lead visitors around the bowl to the crash site. Alternatively, a ring road will circle the bowl to a parking area near the sacred ground. Visitors will be able to walk along the edge of the crash site to a wall, aligned with the flight path, holding a band of marble inscribed with the names of the 40 heroes.

Q: What is unique about the land?

A: The land is layered with a history of different uses each of which has created qualities we find today; originally wilderness forest, then opened for agriculture, stripped and excavated for coal mining and then the violent crash of United Flight 93. We have tried to use each of these layers in the memorial design; shaping open space with new forest and memorial trees, sculpting the earth to enhance the bowl, and expressing the flight path and impact site.

In addition to these layers are the underlying qualities of the place; a timeless tranquility appropriate for the final resting place of 40 heroes, combined with the starkness of an open, windswept landscape where one of the most courageous acts in American history occurred.

Q: What was the biggest challenge in the project?

A: To design a memorial, while still under national duress from 9/11, that will stand the test of time by continuing to honor the 40 heroes and provide personal meaning to future generations of Americans and freedom-loving people.

From the point of view of the project overall, land acquisition and fundraising remain the biggest challenges.

Q: Please explain why the original design was changed to make it more like a bowl.

A: The original design has always been organized around the circular landform of the bowl.

The circular form is what inspired the curving walkway and groves of trees that embrace the field of honor. The orientation of the bowl has always been toward the sacred ground. We developed varied experiences for visitors around the perimeter of the bowl; the flight path entry, visitor facility between memorial walls, 40 memorial groves, the wetlands and the sacred ground. At the western edge of the bowl, we further developed the Western Overlook. This area was more open in our original design but by adding trees and interpretive material, the visitor experience is more complete around the circular bowl and better focused to the sacred ground.

Q: Is this a broken circle as critics claim?

A: The edge of the sacred ground "breaks" the circular perimeter of the bowl to give it the prominence it deserves as the

focal point of the entire park and the final resting place of the 40 heroes.

Most importantly, the design is an open circle: Open to seasonal change, maturity over time and open to personal interpretation through multiple memorial and landscape experiences. It is not just a closed, singular form. The memorial walls near the entrance open to the western landscape. Those walls frame the open sky above the flight path. The memorial groves open the circle along lines that radiate out from its center. Rebuilt wetlands span the bowl edge, opening natural habitat between the memorial and landscape beyond. Different vantage points around the bowl offer vistas of the countryside beyond the park.

The entrance moves through the circular edge along the flight path, so as visitors enter they will be aligned with United Flight 93 through their own experience. The mission statement preamble will introduce the theme of the memorial at the end of the walkway, but visitors will not be able to keep walking straight through to the crash site. They must move around the bowl or through it on trails for multiple experiences.

Q: What is the most important element of the design?

A: The sacred ground is the focal point of the entire park but the relationships of the other memorial features and visitor experiences that culminate at the sacred ground are very important as its context. We did not want to create a monument that would draw attention from the sacred ground, but left the field of honor open so the impact site would remain the main feature.

Q: What did you first think when you heard about the design controversy?

A: We suspected there might be some misinterpretation with the name of one of the memorial features. The degree of wild speculation, hysteria, hate and personal attack by some came as a surprise, as did some of the media's complicity in seeking and promoting controversy.

Q: What is your response to the allegations of Islamic symbolism?

A: These allegations are self-serving propaganda driven by a closed-minded ideology that is blind to new meaning and form. Our design is an original and distinctly American memorial that honors the 40 heroes of United Flight 93.

Q: Are there other specific allegations concerning the memorial or your participation in the process that you wish to address?

A: It is important to remember how much support this memorial enjoys. Tens of thousands of Americans have stepped forward to help build it. It is also heartening to know how much dedication, by the community, families, government and design team, there has been and continues to be.

Q: What do you think about Tom Burnett (father of Tom Burnett Jr., one of the Flight 93 passengers) continuing to speak against the design?

A: Nearly three years ago when we spoke directly, he was satisfied. I don't know what changed in his mind but it is a shame he fails to see the design's originality and true meaning.

Q: Some have argued that the competition was a flawed process because it included non-professionals and people with vested interests on the selection juries. What is your response?

A: I couldn't disagree more, and neither could the professional designers and architects that participated on the jury, all of whom are openly supportive of this process.

The main proponents of this opinion are a competition adviser not involved with the project who has a bias against non-professional participation (which strikes me as elitist) and two entrants who can't get over not being selected.

This was an excellent competition; well organized, open to public participation, and professionally managed. The two juries (for Stage 1 and Stage 2) were diverse and carefully chosen to represent all the partner organizations as well as to include professionals from the fields of public art, design, architecture, landscape architecture and national park

management. The informed contribution of professionals complemented the sensitive insight of community and family members. I think if you asked most of the jurists, they would tell you their experience was one of the best and most rewarding of their lives.

Q: Others claim that the two-stage process allowed for ideas from other designs to be incorporated, through no fault of your own. What are your thoughts on this?

A: Our current design concept is consistent with our Stage 1 entry, but it is further developed.

Stage 1 of a competition allows each entrant to present a design concept as a foundation for further development. Stage 2 allows finalists to improve the design's performance by responding to more information. This "design development" is not the same as "changing the design." The people making these accusations (the same competition advisor and entrant pair) refuse to acknowledge the difference because they are either too bitter or know so little about design and the design development process.

As part of the design competition process, the first jury was re-convened to review the five finalist entries and validate that these Stage 2 designs were consistent with the Stage 1 concepts. In each case it was determined that the finalist submissions, including ours, were consistent with the original designs.

Q: How long will construction take?

A: About 40 percent of the full memorial and park will be built in the first phase. Assuming funding is available and the necessary land has been purchased, then construction could begin in late 2009, last about 20 months, and be complete by 9/11/2011.

Q: What is the next step in the process?

A: We are about to start the technical studies and drawings required for bidding and construction for the first phase.

Meanwhile, I understand we are close to having the funds to construct the first phase and the National Park Service and Families of Flight 93 are working on several land acquisition challenges.

Q: What is the anticipated date of completion?

A: Implementation of future phases is dependent upon available funding.

Q: What are you most looking forward to as the memorial's designer?

A: The time after full construction when the trees have grown enough to shape the spaces as intended, and when Americans appreciate this place as one that they should visit at least once in their lifetime.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to add?

A: With such a large project, and in many ways being unfamiliar in its approach as a memorial landscape, it is helpful to see the design on more intimate, personal terms. The following expresses some of our inspiration in this regard.

The Flight 93 National Memorial

Picture an open, windswept field

Roughly circular, shaped like a bowl

- a common field.

At the edge of that field, 40 heroes defeated terrorism on Sept. 11, 2001,

Giving their lives selflessly, and

Changing that place to a field of honor, forever.

Suppose a friend or someone in your family lost a loved one,

How would you comfort them?

How would you give thanks to someone for a sacrifice they made for you?

We thought of an embrace.

What if 40 heroes rose up together, making the ultimate sacrifice for freedom,

Defending our nation's capital.

How would you honor their action?

We chose an embrace, a mile long,

through 40 memorial groves of trees found in western Pennsylvania.

We chose a gesture heroic in scale, fitting for the acts of the passengers and crew of United Flight 93, and appropriate as a national memorial;

a national embrace encircling that field,

oriented to the sacred ground, the final resting place of 40 heroes.

Their names will be inscribed along the flight path where they chose to make a difference.

Imagine your last contact with a loved one was a phone conversation.

You would remember their voice.

We chose to remember 40 voices in a tower

with chimes to carry their living memory, steadfast but ever changing in the wind.

The Flight 93 National Memorial will be a memorial landscape unique to this place of history and commemorating the generous acts of courage by these 40 passengers and crew members of Flight 93. - Paul Murdoch, Architect Flight 93 National Memorial

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