

Style

American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial has impact larger than its size

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Memorial in recognition of disabled veterans opens on the Mall.

The American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial is a modest new addition.

Sept. 29, 2014 | The American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial is seen in Washington. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

By Philip Kennicott October 5 Follow @PhilipKennicott

It's hard to imagine a more complicated or uncongenial place to design a memorial than the triangular plot of land just south of the Mall now occupied by the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial, which was dedicated Sunday. It is bounded on all sides by roads or highway access lanes. At least twice a day, it is clogged by traffic as suburbanites head to and from Maryland and Virginia. On one side, it is shadowed by the dour but dignified bulk of Marcel Breuer's Department of Health and Human Services headquarters, which has been greatly marred by an irrational thicket of bollards and a sadly overaggressive fence surrounding a dismal playground. And looking south, the green horizon has been obliterated by elevated highways and the toxic industrial behemoth known as the Capitol Power Plant.

But there are a few assets: a good view of the gleaming white dome on Capitol Hill, and the Bartholdi Fountain and gardens just across Washington Avenue SW. The memorial design, by the Alexandria-based Michael Vergason Landscape Architects, struggles to capitalize on these, framing a view of the Capitol through a large cut in a white granite wall on the west side of the plaza. The memorial also features a low, minimalist fountain that draws the eye to the more ornate Bartholdi fountain nearby, and from there onward and upward to where, once upon a time, the U.S. Congress authorized the wars that have left so many Americans gravely transformed in body and spirit.

More impressive than the smart use of views, however, is the memorial's open embrace of the busy spot on which it sits. Although it is bounded by a wall on the west side, the angled edge of the park that fronts Washington Avenue has been left open, so that passing commuters can see the memorial. It also sits on a natural pedestrian path between the Capitol and the dense cluster of federal office buildings around Federal Center SW and L'Enfant Plaza.

Vergason says the memorial, and its sponsors, especially welcome the foot traffic. “Their natural course moves them right through the memorial, so the memorial becomes part of daily life,” he says. The plaza and its fountain, bronze sculptures, inscribed glass panels and granite wall are meant to be constant, quiet reminders of the ongoing toll of war. The texts inscribed throughout the monument are striking in their emphasis not on the glory but the pity of war. “In war, there are no unwounded soldiers,” reads one citation by the popular aphorist José Narosky. Others stress the necessity of rebuilding one’s life and the vital power of love and companionship during the healing process. Perhaps the most traditional mention of the larger purpose of war is a quotation from Dwight D. Eisenhower about the “honorable scars of dangerous service” and the importance of that service to ensure “that our great nation might continue to live according to the expressed will of its own citizens.”

Eisenhower, in some ways, has an important connection to the Disabled for Life memorial, which sits only two blocks from where architect Frank Gehry has designed an as-yet-unbuilt memorial to the 34th president and World War II general. Not only did Eisenhower speak eloquently of the trauma of war, the memorial that will honor him would occupy an almost equally challenging urban context, surrounded by a busy traffic artery and some rather severe mid-century architecture. In both cases, though in very different ways, the designers of these two memorials have attempted to create open, fluid spaces, while deflecting attention from a world of concrete, cars, business suits and the dull grind of bureaucracy.



Visitors gather during the dedication ceremony Sunday of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial in Washington, D.C. (Sammy Dallal/Sammy Dallal/Invision/AP)

As Washington continues to build memorials, while struggling (not always successfully) to preserve the Mall as “a substantially completed work of civic art,” there will only be more of this quirky Washington subspecies of the form: Monuments in Awkward Spaces. Yet that is a good thing. Better to fill in and enliven forlorn

corners of the city than pave over its green spaces with gargantuan new memorials vainly competing with the established favorites.

So the new memorial earns its highest marks for being neighborly. And as you explore it, its embodiment of good citizenship grows deeper. Many of

those who visit will have impaired mobility, and the memorial is attentive to that in ways that might not be immediately obvious to the able-bodied. The star-shaped fountain and triangular reflecting pool are set low to the ground so that they can be easily surveyed by someone sitting in a wheelchair; there are a great number of benches, strategically placed in front of glass text panels and with unobtrusive metal bars to help people who need assistance sitting or standing up; and the curb cuts for wheelchair ramps have straight rather than flaring edges, which helps people with visual limitations. Limited parking is available, and there is a generous drop-off lane for buses.

But what of the memorial itself, its architectural and design impact? A flame fueled by bubbles of gas rising through water in the fountain is the most powerful visual icon, mixing myriad elemental metaphors: the healing, cleansing and forgetfulness of water with the enlightenment, tempering power and sense of the eternal signified by fire. If the star shape of the fountain feels reflexive and clichéd, the visual seduction of fire dancing on a calm pool of water is mesmerizing. The effort to use trees and a hedge on the south side to block one of the uglier patches of the city is also a welcome gesture. Thankfully, the memorial hasn't been overwhelmed by a clutter of individual names, which would swamp the plaza in particularity and diminish its collective appeal.

But mostly, what is good about this memorial (from a purely aesthetic point of view) is in the details: the quality of the engraving, the angles inscribed in the paving stones, the lighting of the glass panels. There isn't any grand architectural statement. But that isn't to damn with faint praise. This is a small memorial, and as memorials tend to become smaller — honoring smaller subsets of the population — they will by necessity become smaller in their aesthetic aims.

If the result is a necklace of small, dignified gardens surrounding the Mall and sprinkled through the downtown core of the city, that wouldn't be a bad thing. Perhaps in a decade or two, we will celebrate the end of the era of the monumental memorial that says very little loudly, and embrace a new age of small memorials, built closer to the ground and more intimately connected to the people.

If anyone is inclined to think that disabled veterans deserved a larger, more spectacular memorial, consider this: In an age of perpetual war and cultural bellicosity, the pacifist sentiments lurking in this new memorial could survive only on the edges of our national conversation.



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