

Board of Directors
Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation
591 Main Street
New York, NY 10044

June 24, 2009

To the Members of the Board:

As an architect, I wish to express my concern about the plan that the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute has submitted to you for approval. It is inconsistent with Louis I. Kahn's final design for the FDR Memorial. That design includes two sculptures. One is located outside the open-roofed room. The second is inside the room. This second sculpture has been omitted in FERI's plan.

Restoring the omitted sculpture would return the Memorial to Kahn's design and provide an opportunity to represent FDR's disability within the Four Freedoms Park.

In his book, *Louis I. Kahn*, Robert McCarter writes of the first sculpture:

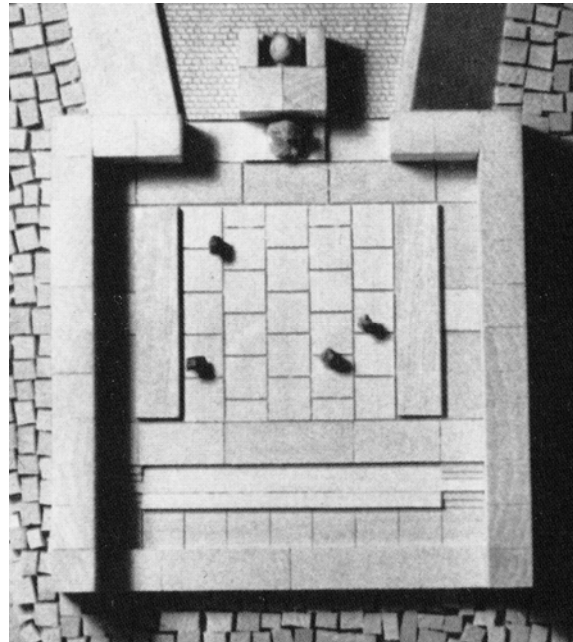
We now enter the...forecourt, into which at the southern end is placed the plinth on which is the lifesize standing statue of Roosevelt.

He then describes the interior of the room and the second sculpture:

...our focus is to the view downriver or to the seated statue of Roosevelt on the opposite side of the wall around which we entered.

In *The New York Times* on April 25, 1974, a month after Kahn died, Paul Goldberger similarly writes:

There will be two sculptures, for which sculptors have not yet been selected; a traditional bust of Roosevelt, which will be just outside the granite wall facing toward the park, and a more abstract statue just inside the room facing the river.

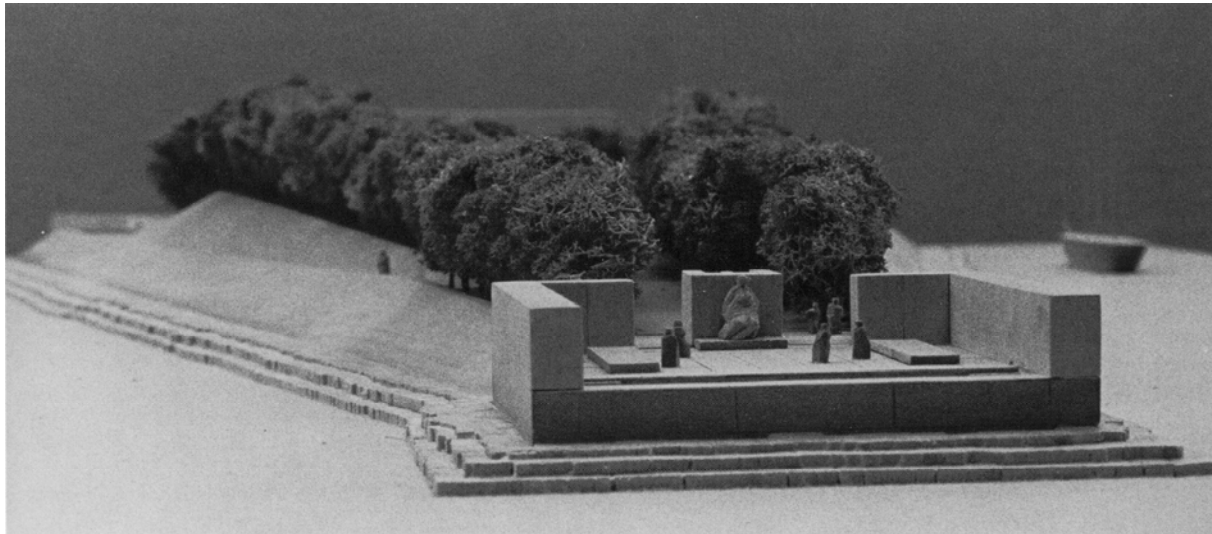


The two sculptures, back to back, can be seen at the top of this image.

Referring to this design as a whole, Goldberger quotes Theodore Liebman of the UDC:

Kahn liked this scheme the best and everyone agreed...He was pleased with his work and we're fortunate that he lived long enough to see the design through to a stage he was satisfied with.

A portion of the following image, showing a sculpture of a seated Roosevelt, accompanied the article.



The removal of this sculpture and its plinth would be a significant departure from Kahn's design. The sculpture and plinth align with the six-foot depth of the adjacent walls, continuing the perimeter of the room and giving justification to the offset to the north of the twelve-foot-tall walls behind the sculpture. Additionally, the absence of the plinth would leave the two entrances to the room less well defined and would alter the composition of the low stone elements in the room.

There are other discrepancies between the original design and the plan by FERI that is now before you, according to the landscape architect who collaborated with Kahn, Harriet Pattison, with whom I spoke today. The series of one-inch slits in the stone wall differs from Kahn's specific placement of two slits that relate to the position of the sun on the anniversaries of FDR's birth and death. The pollarding of the trees was considered by Kahn but dispensed with in his final plan. Ms. Pattison is excited about the likely realization of the project, but cautions that authenticity is essential. Her consultation should be sought now before the final plan is approved.

This month, in an open letter to the Roosevelt Island community, Ambassador William J. vanden Heuvel writes, "I never give a speech about FDR without telling the story of his disability."

Despite this assertion, Ambassador vanden Heuvel seems willing to allow the Four Freedoms Park to speak in a grand way about FDR, to generations of people, without telling the story of FDR's disability.

Dr. Jack Resnick has made several presentations explaining the importance of the intertwined history of FDR; polio; and Roosevelt Island's hospitals, disabled population and accessible buildings. His compelling op-ed article in *The Main Street WIRE* of March 29, 2008 is attached to this letter with his permission.

The Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute has expressed its wish to keep this story outside the Four Freedoms Park. Sally Minard, president of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park, said at the May 27th public meeting, “It was never our intention to show a full figure of Roosevelt when the Four Freedoms Park was designed. It was not to focus on that aspect of his life, but to celebrate his vision for the world and the promise of the Four Freedoms.”

- Concerning a full figure of FDR: at least one was included in the original design, as seen in the image above.
- Concerning the park’s mission to celebrate FDR's vision for the world: the mission is achieved with inscriptions in stone of a portion of FDR's 1941 address to Congress (the “Four Freedoms speech”) in a contemplative setting within view of the United Nations. The planned bust of FDR does not contribute to this understanding of FDR's vision for the world. Replacement of that bust with a sculpture that displays FDR's disability, or inclusion of a second sculpture within the room that displays FDR disability, would in no way compromise the Park’s mission. Ambassador vanden Heuvel's words imply that an appreciation of FDR's disability is necessary for an understanding of FDR’s life.

Ambassador vanden Heuvel's open letter, which FERI has included in its submission to the RIOC Board for your consideration in approving its plan for the Park, states in part,

*Somehow we must find a way to convey this incredible story to those who visit Southpoint...
Our task is to work together to find a way to accomplish our mutual purpose...*

FERI met with the Roosevelt Island Disabled Association (RIDA) this past Friday. Accounts of the meeting indicate that FERI did not offer to revise the Park plan. During a discussion of an alternative way to acknowledge FDR’s disability and its importance to Roosevelt Island, outside the Four Freedoms Park, FERI offered no institutional support toward that “mutual” purpose. Given this discrepancy between FERI's words and actions, it is unlikely that FERI would have any further interest in discussing a representation of FDR's disability if RIOC gives approval now to FERI's plan.

Directors of RIOC are as qualified as FERI to make a common-sense determination about this sculpture and have as much responsibility to this public project and to the City as does FERI. Please do not allow FERI's narrow desire to avoid making changes, or to avoid the logistics of commissioning a new sculpture, to trump your own judgment.

Far from objecting to a change at this time, contributors to the Four Freedoms Park would surely be happy to learn that the Park would conform to Kahn’s original design and to the Four Freedom Park’s promotional material.

It appears that the right thing to do, in 2009, is to incorporate a representation of FDR's disability as one of the primary sculptures at Four Freedoms Park, whether or not there are other such acknowledgements outside the Park. The absence of such a sculpture would be a permanent, regrettable omission, given our current awareness of its importance and its potential to inspire. Either of the two sculptures can depict FDR’s disability and still be true to Kahn’s design. Harriet Pattison explains that the specific design of the sculptures were not of great concern for Kahn; their design would have been left to the artists. The bust of FDR by Jo Davidson was considered at the time simply because it was available.

I believe this the only way at Southpoint to appropriately celebrate the history of both Roosevelt and Roosevelt Island as well as the legacy of this great architect.

If you agree, I respectfully suggest that you must help make it happen by withholding your approval of the FERI plan until the absence of the second sculpture and other discrepancies are resolved and an appropriate recognition of FDR's disability is planned. After 35 years, it's worth taking the time to get it right.

Sincerely,

Marc Diamond

enclosure

Op-ed article, *The Main Street WIRE*, by Dr. Jack Resnick, March 29, 2008

cc:

Paul Goldberger

Senator José M. Serrano

Assemblymember Mikah Kellner

Councilmember Jessica Lappin

It's been over 15 years since I've written an opinion piece for *The WIRE*. I decided to speak up after attending a presentation Tuesday at the Good Shepherd Community Center. Over 50 people showed up to see and hear the latest on the FDR Memorial long-planned for the southern tip of Roosevelt Island.

When the slide show ended, attendees came to the microphone and voiced their opinions. While most of the residents who spoke complained about one part or another of the architects' plans, several residents rose in spirited defense of the design. I came to the meeting with no pre-formed opinion. Is granite hard or soft? Will trees enhance the view or diminish it? Should FDR's bust face north or south? Will there be enough money to pay for the construction? Will either the City or the State pay for the upkeep? These all seem like valid questions. I don't know the answer to any of them.

Here's what I do know. Somebody designed a memorial to FDR on Roosevelt Island that completely ignored the man's physical disability. Franklin Roosevelt spent much of his adult life in a wheelchair. The polio virus, which infected him in 1921 at the age of 39, left him with almost no use of his legs. Twelve years later he became President of the United States. He went on to save the country from economic calamity and the world from Hitler.

Many of the speakers on Tuesday night made reference to FDR's disability as a special reason to have his memorial on this Island. Here's what they mean. In 1970, Welfare Island housed two chronic disease hospitals and a Fire Department training station. Many of the hospitals' patients had contracted polio before the disease was eradicated by vaccination in 1955. Some of

them were in "iron lungs." When the disease weakened the muscles of breathing, artificial respiration had to be provided. Over the years, Coler and Goldwater Hospitals pioneered the use of ventilators that freed polio victims from being tethered to stationary machines.

Nancy Brown was one of those people. For more than 30 years, she has lived in Eastwood and, on most days, you can see her taking the sun in front of Rivercross. Nancy remembers the discussions of renaming Welfare Island. She remembers FDR's connection to polio as one of the prime factors in the Island's final name-change. She remembers Vicki Holland. Vicki was another polio survivor who had moved from the wards of Goldwater Hospital to an apartment on Roosevelt Island. A plaque memorializes Vicki at the base of the lighthouse at the Island's northern tip.

The Island's housing was built with the disabled as a priority. Certain apartments were specially designed with wider doorways, lower light switches, and accessible bathroom and kitchen facilities. All of the public and commercial spaces followed suit. People in wheelchairs became part of the fabric of all of our lives. Roosevelt Island is a living, breathing memorial to FDR. And when we celebrated FDR Day here each year, it was clear that we were focused on FDR as an icon for the disabled.

The FDR Memorial on this Island should focus on the President's strength in conquering his disability. Many possibilities come to mind. For instance, he should not be memorialized with a bust. We should see a greater-than-life-sized statue of him sitting in a wheelchair – and he should face north toward Goldwater and Coler Hospitals. And toward Vicki Holland.

island observer



Jack Resnick