

If at First You Don't Succeed

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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ALL'S well that ends well in art and in memoriam. Five years after the competition winning design for the Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorial in Washington was unveiled, attacked, revised, rejected and recommissioned, the Roosevelt Memorial Commission has released its new, handsome and, hopefully, final proposal.

The new design is the work of Marcel Breuer, best known at the moment for his smashingly successful Whitney Museum in New York, and Herbert Beckhard, of the Breuer office. It displays some of the same strengths and sensibilities as that excellent building, and it is the most promising monument to loom on the memorial scene—admittedly overcrowded in Washington—in quite a while.

Neat Trick

The Breuer - Beckhard scheme is a thoughtful, contemporary, creative solution that honors the man it commemorates at a representative level of today's esthetic achievement, without doing violence to the classical Washington image. That is a neat trick, and an admirable one, involving a kind of talent and artistic intelligence too seldom seen or understood in the nation's capital.

The \$4-million proposal consists of seven wing-like, rough granite walls arranged concentrically, like slanted spokes, around a polished granite cube, on which there would be a Roosevelt likeness.

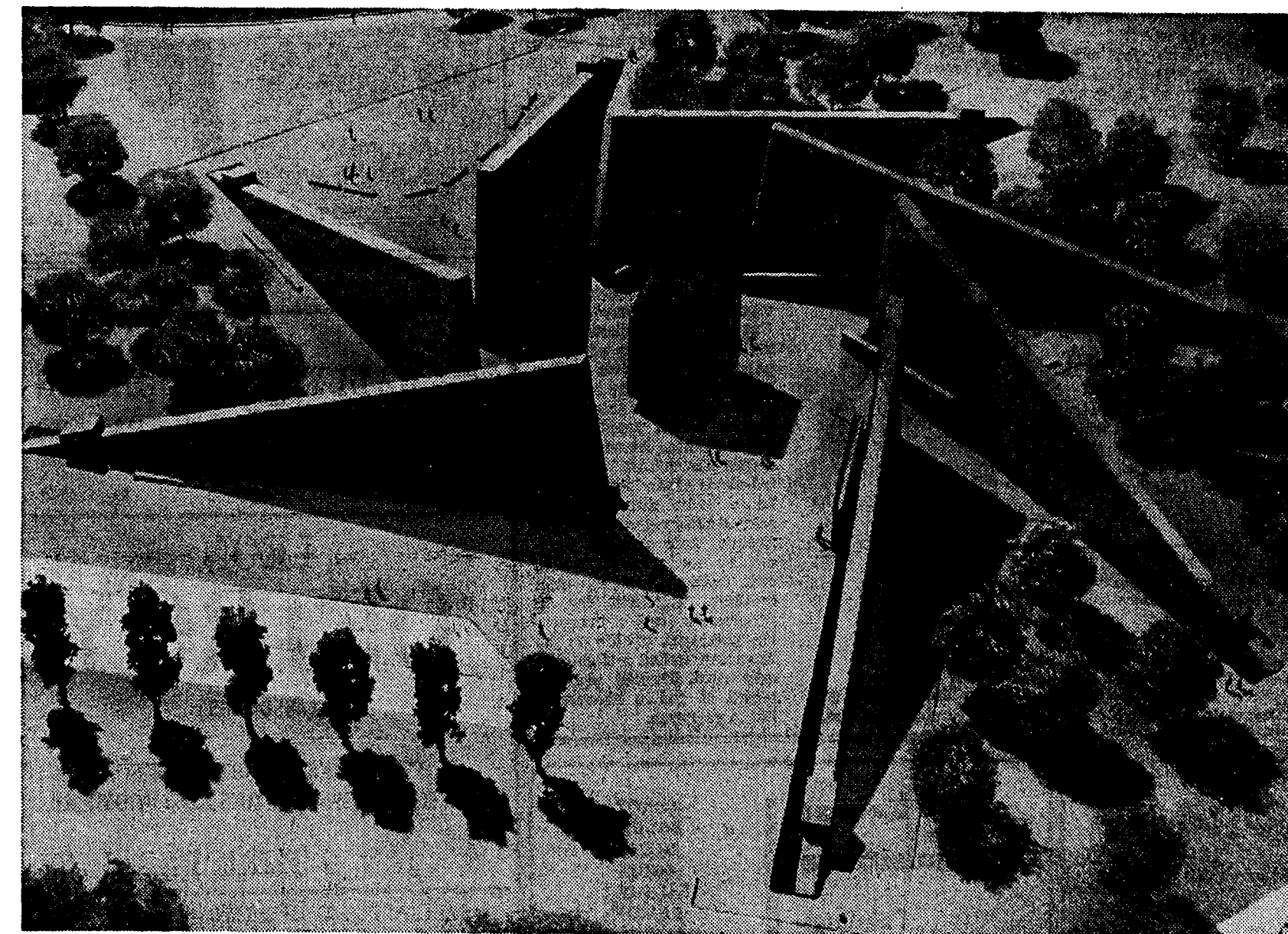
The slightly canted, triangular walls, 60 feet high on their tallest side, slope gently to earth, and are flanked by slender pools. Where the radial walls focus on the cen-

tral cube, an open plaza is formed. Set on a granite base, the memorial is penetrated irregularly by park and trees, without rigid demarcation. Benches will be set within magnolia and cherry groves; columnar beeches will line the approach.

With the approach, the memorial will take up 5.8 acres of the narrow, water-surrounded peninsula of the 66-acre West Potomac Park. It is almost equidistant from the Lincoln, Jefferson and Washington monuments, which measure 141 feet, 129 feet and 598 feet high respectively, above sea level, as opposed to the 73 feet above sea level projected for the Roosevelt design.

The granite cube, raised slightly above ground, will have a picture of Roosevelt on the west, or entrance side. This will not be the conventional memorial portrait. It will be one of the many expressive photographs made during his lifetime, transferred to stone by a new method developed experimentally by the architects and the stone-cutting industry. The texture of half-tone engraving—a screen of dots of varying size and density that reproduces the image in printed media—will be cut or sandblasted into the granite surface.

At the large scale that this is planned, the portrait will focus at about 20 feet; short of that distance it will be a pattern of abstract, incised cuts. Beyond that, it will read as an image of Roosevelt as the 20th century knew and recorded him, raised to the level of monumental sculpture through 20th-century techniques.



Model of latest design for Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in West Potomac Park, Washington, D. C.
A new, handsome and, hopefully, final proposal

Bea Schnall

To this representation will be added another 20th-century technological device, voice reproduction, with excerpts from Roosevelt's speeches at normal voice level audible only in a limited central area near the picture, interspersed with periods of silence. Thus the traditional dignity of simple, monumental forms in stone—

the most moving and effective architectural tribute to great men—is combined with contemporary portraiture in voice and image.

Curiously, or rather, not curiously at all, this design has quite a bit in common with the rejected prizewinner. (That ill-fated scheme was the work of Pedersen, Tilney, Hoberman, Wasserman and

Beer. With some reservations, Breuer thought their solution good.)

Both approaches have emphasized an enclosing arrangement of severely monumental, free-standing walls; both have stressed a multi-dimensional, processional experience of the visitor through planes and spaces. A very

large percentage of the 574 competition entries five years ago dealt in similar forms and values. Examination of the few postwar memorials of impact and quality show a parallel reliance on abstract, slablike elements.

This is, of course, the authentic sculptural and architectural vision of our time, and only the genuine expres-

sion of this vision will produce a genuine monument. There will undoubtedly be critics of this design who would prefer some version of the exhausted Greek peristyle cum cotton clouds and personified virtues in low relief with the inflated superstatue that has always been the front runner in the Washing-

ton galloping graveyard sweepstakes.

The thought of still another of those soporific substitutes for nobility invokes nothing but esthetic and emotional ennui. Familiarity may breed comfortably somnolent sensations of patriotic piety, but it says little for the creative character or claims to glory of our times, talents, or statemen. A monument stands for its age, as well as for a man. Those with the criteria to judge will question the greatness of both if the expressive medium of immortalization is mediocrity.

End of the Line

Beyond the conceptual similarities of the two designs, there are significant differences that tip the scale in Breuer's favor. The giant slabs of the original scheme had a strong vertical emphasis, and their height was reduced from a towering 167 feet to 130 feet in response to worried protest that the neighboring monuments would be overpowered. The slabs were to be made of concrete aggregate, an excellent new material, but one for which we are only beginning to observe the weathering process.

The present design is horizontal in feeling and its height is roughly half that of the first proposal. It is secure in the beauty and permanence of its granite masonry. It is also obvious that it is the end of the line. Washington is in no desperate need of memorials, but it is monumentally short of the architectural and esthetic contributions of this extraordinarily creative century. The Roosevelt Commission can either build this one or forget it, for it is unlikely that a more appropriate version will come along.