

Roosevelt Memorial Design Hits Snags

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The design for the Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorial planned for Welfare Island, scheduled to be released last week, has run into snags of time and taste.

According to Edward J. Logue, head of the New York State Urban Development Corporation, which is building a new town on Welfare Island and has commissioned the memorial, the postponement is only temporary.

It is caused by delays in schedule due to changes in the design, and the necessity of obtaining approvals of the completed scheme. In past attempts to build Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorials, this has been a major obstacle.

The architect selected by the Urban Development Corporation, Louis Kahn, is on his second version of the scheme for the southern tip of the island. In one of the best-kept secrets in the art world, it is known only that whatever he is creating has been reduced in height from 60 to 20 feet.

The first scheme proved to be beyond the projected budget. Mr. Logue, who has been caught between poles of admiration and frustration in a long career of dealing with talented architects as a development administrator, expresses no surprise. The second design is now almost complete and will be shown

to corporation officials this week.

The approvals still to be obtained are from the Roosevelt family, the Four Freedoms Foundation, which has funded the commission, and the Urban Development Corporation.

Although confidence in Mr. Kahn runs high—he is considered one of the world's most distinguished architects—the general atmosphere around the project at the moment is tense.

Skillful Blend

Mr. Kahn is known for a searching, skillful blend of architectural philosophy and structure with a sense of timeless monumentality.

The track record of the Roosevelt family, however, has been two turndowns of modern designs for a proposed Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorial in Washington, in 1964 and 1967. Roosevelt taste has emerged as cautiously traditional.

One project, an abstraction of stone slabs by Pederson, Tilney, Wassermann, Beer and Hoberman, was the result of a national competition. The second attempt, equally abstract, was the work of Marcel Breuer, who was recently honored with a show at the Metropolitan Museum.

The Kahn commission has grown out of a study and proposal by William Walton, artist and former head of

Washington's Fine Arts Commission, who was also friend and esthetic adviser to President Kennedy.

Mr. Logue asked Mr. Walton for suggestions. Mr. Walton, in turn, asked architects, critics and public figures. One of these was Philip Johnson, who commented on the neglected and desolate site.

"I pleaded with them not to dump all that rock from the subway excavation," he said. "Look at it; it's a dump. They've covered up all the natural rock formations. Whatever goes out there must have scale."

The Walton report proposes an architectural composition in a parklike setting that would serve as a shelter and symbolic structure.

Mr. Walton describes it as "a walk-through monument uniting architecture and sculpture, landscape and seascape, to recall the President and his deeds." It would be "low and massive, open to the sky, thick walled, of varying levels. Bays and irregularities could contain special areas where engraved F.D.R. quotations could be contemplated."

The report also called for a museum stocked with changing exhibits from Hyde Park, featuring a documentary movie on Roosevelt of the quality of "The Sorrow and the Pity," the French film of the Occupation.

Mr. Walton suggested

use of a realistic representation of Roosevelt—the point on which other designs have largely foundered—such as an enlargement of Jo Davidson's Roosevelt head.

Finally, he recommended that Welfare Island should be renamed Franklin D. Roosevelt Island.

Museum Idea Dropped

The ideas of a museum and movie have been dropped, as a matter of expense. What survives is the architectural commission. The Walton report called specifically for the selection of Louis Kahn.

How Mr. Kahn has translated these suggestions is still to be revealed.

Large numbers of tourists would be expected to visit the memorial. Access, one of the most serious problems of the island's development, would be by the cable car currently planned to serve residents from a point near the Queensboro Bridge.

Part of Mr. Walton's investigation included a visit to Liberty Island and the Statue of Liberty. His observation was that tourist interest concentrates on active climbing and picture-taking, refreshment-buying and restroom use. Without cynicism, he points out that the latter activities must be accommodated by any public monument design.

'Must Look Beautiful'

out of public life was almost the response to his opinion of the memorial. There are caveats from professionals.

"Whatever is done, must be done to outlast everything else on the island," said James Polshek, head of the Columbia School of Architecture. "This memorial must look permanent and beautiful."

"You and I know," Philip Johnson told Mr. Walton, "that the only contemporary sculptor who could handle that site is Claes Oldenburg. And we also know how much chance there would be of those people commissioning him."

"Don't use any bright lights," warned I.M. Pei, designer of Washington's National Gallery extension. "Remember, my bedroom faces that site. And so do a million other bedrooms."

Mr. Kahn says that his own life was strongly influenced by Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, which helped him weather the Depression.

Whether his design will weather the vicissitudes of taste that have brought down so many memorials in recent times is still an open question.