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Must War Memorials Be Ugly?



Beautiful sentiments deserve beautiful expression. Let's head off yet another installment of well-meant monstrosities

by ROBERT MOSES

ALL OVER the country plans are being hatched for war memorials. Demands upon public officials for space in parks and public places are daily becoming more insistent. Supporting them is the kind of genuine sentiment which can not be denied, but needs guidance into the right channels. This guidance was sadly lacking after the Civil, Spanish American and first World War, and to this lack must be attributed the sowing of the dragon seed of bad art and the reaping of thousands of distorted bronze men.

My own city, New York, has some 700,000 boys in the armed services. We have already been flooded with requests for neighborhood memorials in the form of service flags, temporary and permanent billboards, plaques, bas reliefs, markers, statues, gates, arches, buildings, and other monumental structures, not to speak of other mementos which combine the impressive with the practical.

If the truth be told, most of the plans for these gestures of patriotism are pathetic, third-rate, inadequate, ugly, undignified and

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certain to defeat in the end the laudable objects which the sponsors have in mind. It is also an unpleasant feature of this business that it attracts, in addition to a host of good people, familiar types of ghoulish politicians, ambitious busybodies, ambulance chasers, and other buzzards, not to speak of tombstone cutters who, in the language of our social workers, are ambitious to eventuate on a larger scale.

As we enter the final phases of the war and the interest, solicitude and patriotism of our people are more and more aroused, it is inevitable that public sentiment will increasingly seek such outlets for its expression of gratitude toward those who have saved the nation in this crisis. It would be most unfortunate if this enthusiasm again spent itself, as it did after 1918, on numerous stupid, expensive and futile monuments unworthy of the community and of those it seeks to honor.

Hundreds of World War I monuments were placed in locations where they were subject to vandalism and rapid deterioration. In most instances the sponsoring local groups lacked funds to employ competent designers and sculptors and to pay for really dignified, significant, and permanently beautiful symbols. It was a field day for second and third rate artists, architects and amateur designers and sculptors.

Recently President William Mather Lewis of Lafayette College in his baccalaureate sermon to members of the graduating class proposed that *living* memorials be established for heroes of the present war, which would contribute something directly and practically to the welfare of mankind. The living memorials, he suggested, should include hospital beds, medical research projects, perpetual scholarships in institutions of higher learning, playgrounds, community halls, crippled children's clinics, music foundations and others which will properly immortalize the country's heroes.

President Lewis' plea, like most Commencement Addresses, takes high ground and has much to commend it, but it just isn't going to solve the problem of public officials. The demand for familiar monuments is as old as war and human achievement. Washington,

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Jefferson and Lincoln live in the hearts of their countrymen, but the same countrymen like to see them in heroic bronze housed in great classic memorials of stone.

By the same token there is no use preaching to a Legion Post, a veterans' organization, a neighborhood civic or fraternal organization, much less to the family and intimate friends of men who fought and perhaps were killed in this war, that *their* memorial should take the form of an endowment in a university, a foundation for medical research, an art center, or an annual prize in public speaking.

A new park or playground is always a possibility but the bronze and stone marker will turn up somewhere even in these surroundings. People want something they can see every day somewhere near the center of their town. It need not be useless, but it will almost certainly be monumental and traditional rather than modern and functional.

The minds of most people when they think of such things run to the type of memorial which will serve as a meeting place, a center for memorial services and ceremonies. Anyone who thinks that pressure for such expressions of patriotism and gratitude can be stopped by appeals for charitable foundations, scholarships and other so-called living memorials, simply does not fully understand human nature.

Mind you, I do not deprecate the living memorials to which President Lewis refers, especially if they are parks or playgrounds. No doubt there will be individuals and groups who will respond to such appeals, but they do not in the least answer the problem of the millions of citizens who are eager to contribute toward the more familiar types of war memorials. The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation is perhaps a nobler conception than the Taj Mahal, and the Medici might have been smarter to wait and patronize Galileo rather than Michelangelo, but these are the decisions of princes and philanthropists, not of the Toms, Dicks and Harrys of our democracy.

But when I say "familiar types" I do not in the least imply that we need to perpetuate the monumental

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monstrosities of previous wars. Men's minds today are on the rank and file rather than on the man on horseback and since cavalry is out and the new forms of mechanized warfare do not lend themselves readily to sculpture, ingenuity as well as taste are prerequisites in the selection of the designer. *Above all we must get away from the ugly, small conventional crossroads memorial on a triangular patch of municipal land.*

WE MADE some progress in the military cemeteries of the last war, but the record is a very uneven and spotty one. Some of these cemeteries were hideous. Some, especially those in France, had noble entrances and beautiful chapels, back of which was the usual forest of tombstones, row after row, all of the same height, martial no doubt, but regimented, depressing and meaningless.

Cities of half a million or more inhabitants probably can never satisfy neighborhood demands by one city-wide memorial. In New York it has been suggested that we have five borough memorials. For example, in the Borough of Queens it has been proposed that we construct in Flushing Meadow Park, the scene of the recent World's Fair, and near the location of the Federal Building on the main axis, a memorial building which would include a carillon tower, a large hall or chapel where flags, plaques, etc. would be placed, with a square in front for outdoor services and meetings, and a lagoon to reflect the memorial.

Sketches of this memorial have been prepared and the people of the borough are being asked to contribute toward its construction. There have, it is true, been suggestions in this borough of more practical memorials such as a zoo, a large athletic stadium, a botanical garden, but these do not seem to have struck the popular response of the Carillon Memorial in Flushing Meadow Park.

IT IS INTERESTING to note that the most debated of all proposed American World War I memorials, namely George Grey Barnard's Rainbow Arch, has never been built. When Mr. Barnard died his estate was too small to

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supply the funds needed to complete the memorial and the proposed site was turned down by the Park Department and Art Commission. No alternative site was ever chosen.

Personally I think that in spite of very fine details, the whole idea of this Rainbow Arch is horribly depressing, and that it would never meet with popular approval. The arch was supposed to portray the futility of war. It was to be a huge affair a hundred feet high, to comprise 50 statues each nine feet high. The statues were deployed in tiers along the arch and many heroic nude figures were looking down into an abyss filled with the crosses of those killed in the war. Mr. Barnard devoted the last seven years of his life to the development of the model of this memorial.

Its fate seems to me to indicate how dangerous it is to place too much reliance on the judgment of an artist, however great. Barnard was completely captivated by a single idea and committed to a sombre, obscure and elaborate symbolism quite beyond the understanding and sympathy of the average man and woman. It is hard to do something adequate for the G.I. Joes without sinking into a sea of symbolism.

The problem of war memorials is, as anyone can see, easy enough to state, but it is difficult to solve because the aims of so many average human beings must be reconciled; and because so much must be left to public officials, who for some curious reason, are expected to be wiser, more courageous, firmer and more far-seeing than those who put them in office. The job is to guide and hold in check the average fellow who knows little about art and wants to show in enduring form what he thinks of the valor and sacrifice of the men in service.

If these G.I. citizens can be persuaded to combine their efforts so as to achieve here and there something of real dignity and beauty, it will be an achievement for which future generations will thank us. The subject is not one for trifling or stuffy preachments. Our standards of taste are not too high, but if they can in fact be raised, now indeed is the occasion and the opportunity.

Robert Moses, vigorous park commissioner for the city of New York and chairman of the state's Council of Parks, is known nationally for the outstanding public works initiated and completed during his regime. He has succeeded in lifting the face of the world's largest city by an extensive program of highway and bridge construction, slum clearance and building of parks and playgrounds.



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