

LIFE & ARTS

ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

A Shrine to Honor Service



BY JULIE V. IOVINE.

Columbus, Ohio
GIVING MEANINGFUL shape to monuments and memorials in this disputatious era is no easy task. The new National Veterans Memorial and Museum gets as close as may be possible.

Designed by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture, the building conjures a light-and-dark silhouette of a drum bound by concrete straps that seem to whip with concentrated force. It feels dynamic, more threshold to a rite of passage than staid monument.

According to the architect, it takes no cues from familiar historic memorials. Though echoing with the suggestion of arches, its form is distinct—altogether appropriate for an institution that celebrates neither battles nor wars, losses nor victories but the myriad individuals from every walk of life who have stepped up to serve our country. The vision of U.S. Sen. John Glenn, who believed children needed to learn more about ethics and community engagement, it is the country’s first national museum dedicated to the idea of service.

Mr. Cloepfil, who is known for architecture with an assured phys-



The new National Veterans Memorial and Museum, designed by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture, which opens Saturday

icality that’s also subtly textured—as in the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, with its rough-hewed, board-formed concrete, and the ceramic-tile-clad Museum of Arts and Design in New York—has here executed a building with a much larger and more powerful presence than its actually quite modest 53,000 square feet.

Visitors can approach the museum, lifted atop a small hill overlooking the Scioto River, either from a staircase leading up from the street or from a large parking

lot (soon to be redeveloped into a mixed-use complex within a new neighborhood with the museum as anchor). The path becomes a ramp that sweeps past the entrance up to an open-air amphitheater on the roof. The front door is notably inconspicuous, tucked into a corner of a glass wall.

The architect describes following the ramp as processional, but that suggestion of formality and hierarchical symmetries is misleading. Instead—and more gracefully—the easy slope feels like a

gentle reveal as the building merges into the larger landscape to become part of the skyline. The roof itself includes a lawn you can walk on. The surrounding seven-acre park was designed by the landscape firm OLIN, and includes a stand of trees arranged as a meditation space with a reflecting pool and water wall made with Ohio limestone and river rocks.

The building’s unflashy facade that appears to be wrapped in loosely woven bands of concrete is in fact a feat of extreme sophistication that would not have been possible 20 years ago. The crisscrossing bands are not attached to some underlying armature, but the structure itself poured from self-consolidating concrete that makes for a smooth, unblemished surface. The bands form three elliptical rings, each in its own orbit, overlapping to create both the outer walls of the building and interior walls for the exhibition galleries. In place of windows, irregular-shaped openings taper down to four square feet or stretch up to 300 square feet as if the building could breathe.

Once inside, the raw-concrete curves of the interwoven concentric walls, visible for the full two-story height of the building, embody an elemental energy providing the backdrop to the in-

stallations by Ralph Appelbaum Associates.

Where the architecture goes for the universal through abstraction, the exhibitions achieve the same by homing in on the individual and the everyday. The complementary strength of the Cloepfil design resides in its spartan simplicity. There are no bronze and marble finishes. Walls are either the same smooth concrete of the exterior or painted gray; the metal display cases look almost as rusty as the footlockers on exhibit. The only splashes of color are found in a multicolored glass wall on the upper-level mezzanine, where doors open onto the roof amphitheater. The glass is colored in stripes according to various campaign medals, from the blue and gray of the Civil War to the blue, yellow, red and white of the global war on terrorism.

The emotionally charged materials contained by and combined with this serene but animated space move one both physically and psychologically on an uplifting path toward a better understanding of how essential service is to perpetuating the life of the communities we cherish and that make up our nation.

Ms. Iovine reviews architecture for the Journal.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

STATIONS OF A SOLDIER’S LIFE

BY EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

Columbus, Ohio
IT DOESN’T TAKE long before you feel a catch in your throat. It comes on soon after you enter the \$75 million National Veterans Memorial and Museum, which opens Saturday here near the Scioto River. At first, having followed a circling walkway from the parking lot you are simply impressed at how the building, designed by Allied Works Architecture, manages to be grand without being grandiose; its tilting arcs of supporting concrete seem caught mid-oscillation around walls of glass. Once you enter the 53,000-square-foot interior, you again follow a circling passage through the main exhibits, which include 14 sets of displays—stations in the lives of American veterans

The opening display—“A Nation Called”—is a stage-setter, including George Washington’s declaration that “every Citizen” of the new nation “owes not only a portion of his property, but even of his personal services to the defense of it.” But the catch comes in the second display, “Why We Serve,” where we begin to glimpse the nature of those demands. After reading about “a range of motives” for enlisting, we come upon the copy of a letter written by Leon Allen Bauer on Nov. 24, 1964, while serving in Vietnam; it was left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington (as were several other documents here). He addresses his two daughters, ages 4 and 1, as if in valediction before a battle:

“Dear Liz & Sue,” he begins, “Don’t be afraid of your future—it will be there waiting for you when you are ready for it. Just be the girls that you are, be good to each



Inside the new National Veterans Memorial and Museum; its exhibits were created by Ralph Appelbaum Associates

other and love your Mother and me in your own ways, be yourselves every day in every thing that you do.” Bauer continues: “There are many things that need to be done no matter how much we dislike to do them.” He goes on to explain his ideals and his devotion to the country and ends: “Be good my little children. Love, Your Daddy.”

Bauer, we learn, was killed in action the following September.

It doesn’t matter that the Vietnam War inspired controversy. It doesn’t matter if those ideals were ever clouded. This is not a historical museum in which we are asked to understand causes, second-guess judgments, or examine American history (though we do get a sense of national scale from a timeline that runs along-

side the displays and we learn that in 2017 there were 1,315,609 U.S. military personnel worldwide, active in 162 countries). This is also not a war museum guided by materiel and strategy and context. This is a museum about the lives of those who served out of duty and belief; it explores their commitments and sacrifice.

It was envisioned by the Marine veteran, astronaut and Ohio Sen. John Glenn, which explains its location. It was brought to life by the Columbus Downtown Development Corp., part of continuing development of the surrounding area. Its exhibits were created by Ralph Appelbaum Associates, a firm that has set standards for museological language, translating abstract ideas

into personal experience. This museum has few artifacts, but many stories. As a building, it is abstract, far different from the “man on horseback” memorials of the 19th century. But its content—powerful and affecting—is intimate while still being devotional in its portrayal of national service.

The overarching narrative is the veteran’s life, beginning with “Leaving Home” (“The last day together you fight back tears every second...” is one wife’s comment). The next section, “Taking the Oath,” focuses on the surprising power of the formal declaration of allegiance, which, as interviews with veterans explain, serves as a kind of touchstone during their later trials. Then we are led through explorations of jobs done,

locations deployed to, combat endured, struggles with civilian life, and accounts of many still devoted to national or community service.

Brief accounts of unusual veterans go back to the Revolutionary War (Peter Francisco, for example, who was called by Washington a “One-Man Army,” or Deborah Sampson, who served while disguised as a man). We also get to know 25 living veterans more intimately, through tautly edited video accounts. Brian Vargas, a second-generation Marine, deployed to Iraq in 2006, recalls his near-death in an attack. John Flinn, who fought in Vietnam, notes that after such an encounter, you start to feel that “death ain’t got nothing on me.” But later, we learn, he was so distraught at hostility encountered on returning home, he quickly changed out of uniform. At varied times, narrators choke up at memories; at times, you do as well. These men and women become impressive, not just for what they did or saw or suffered, but for what they have become.

There are flaws: The second-floor memorial hall seems chintzy after everything leading up to it, and too much cross-checking is required to get a clear sense of the featured individuals. The overall approach is *too* ahistoric; how did the military experience and its effects change over the centuries? But now, when the experience of military service is alien to the majority of Americans, this museum offers some recompense. And in our politically riven time, its achievement is extraordinary for the understanding it both demonstrates and inspires.

Mr. Rothstein is the Journal’s Critic at Large.