

FDR MEMORIAL'S BRAILLE LETTERS POSE SIZABLE PROBLEM FOR BLIND

By Karl Vick

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The new Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial may have been designed with the disabled in mind, but a problem has emerged with the Braille lettering on what is meant to be the monument's most inviting sculpture.

Most blind people find it unreadable.

"It doesn't say anything!" Linda Kipps said after running her fingers over the raised dots on the piece titled "Social Programs."

The sculpture, a massive bronze wall of bas-relief in the monument's "second room," features 54 images and, beside them, raised Braille dots. But Kipps, a blind District resident visiting the memorial just two weeks after it opened, added her voice to those complaining that what the dots mostly communicate to a visually impaired visitor is frustration.

"If they're going to go to the trouble to put the dots there, it would be helpful if there were actually something you could read," Kipps said.

According to the sculptor and at least one blind visitor, the dots are genuine Braille. They spell out the initials of WPA, CCC and other "alphabet agencies" that Roosevelt championed, programs that put the human figures in the sculpture back to work. The initials (complete with periods) are followed on the bronze by the full name of the agency, then its date of inception.

The main problem is the size of the dots. The characters, or cells, they form are too big to fit under a fingertip.

"The dots are about five times normal size," said Charlie Hodge, another blind visitor. "And the spacing of the dots within a cell and between cells, because of the enlargement, is screwed up.

"It's an additional irritation on top of the controversy over not depicting FDR as the disabled person we know he was."

Gail Snider, public education coordinator at Volunteers for the Blind, said she could read the sculpture's Braille only with great effort.

"Imagine if print letters were so large that you couldn't read each one without eye movement -- you couldn't get a single whole letter within your field of vision without eye movement. That would be the equivalent of what this is like," Snider said. "I appreciate artistic license and so on, but it doesn't make it very readable if you magnify it like that."

Sculptor Robert Graham acknowledged that license was taken.

"My concept of that piece was to have Braille as a kind of invitation to touch, more than anything," Graham said from his California studio.

"Braille is not much different than touching a face or anything else," he said. "That was kind of the graphic idea, the layering of many faces coming out and the layering of the Braille and the layering of several tactile surfaces.

"Nothing is life-size in the piece, so you very much have to adjust yourself to the scale."

Graham declined to accept responsibility for a second problem. The sculptor said it was the decision of the memorial's overall architect, Lawrence Halprin, to mount the bronze at a height that put at least a third of the Braille about eight feet off the ground -- well beyond reach. "I didn't design the monument," Graham said.

An aide to Halprin called the elevation necessary.

"The idea is you hang the pieces so they can be appreciated from a distance, so they can draw you into them," said Dee Mullen, speaking from Halprin's San Francisco office.

The people running the memorial are as confused as any visitor about the Braille. One National Park Service ranger on duty at the monument Friday said the script was not meant to be read. A Park Service spokeswoman agreed. "It was just supposed to give the illusion of a message," she said. But a second ranger was under the opposite impression.

And Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii), the FDR Memorial Commission's co-chairman, said while defending the monument's design amid the wheelchair controversy that the bas-relief would include "Braille for the sight-impaired."

Hodge said, "It's a nice idea that's gone awry."

The confusing reality has distressed even some sighted visitors. Washington resident S. Paul Kramer left the monument "astonished at the insensitivity of our monumentalists" after seeing an elderly blind man run his fingertips over the Braille lettering in vain. Kramer said that when he asked what it said, the man replied: "It says nothing, nothing at all. It must be a fake." "I simply took it as a piece of either callousness or swindle," Kramer said. "And obviously the people in charge of the monument must be upset, if they know about it."