

A Place of Reverence with a Playful Side; FDR Memorial Invites Interaction, and Worry

Wheeler, Linda. The Washington Post; Washington, D.C. [Washington, D.C], 20 Apr 1997,

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

In Washington, a city where most statues are intended for viewing from a respectful distance, the new Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial invites people to climb all over it. Visitors are expected to touch the bronze statues, splash in the sparkling waterfalls and lounge in a park of newly planted two-story-tall trees.

The friendly interaction between visitor and memorial was planned by San Francisco designer Lawrence Halprin, creating what could be the year's biggest attraction for tourists and the largest headache for the monument's official caretaker, the National Park Service.

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FULL TEXT

In Washington, a city where most statues are intended for viewing from a respectful distance, the new Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial invites people to climb all over it. Visitors are expected to touch the bronze statues, splash in the sparkling waterfalls and lounge in a park of newly planted two-story-tall trees.

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The service's superintendent for the downtown parks, Arnold Goldstein, said the interactive nature of the FDR Memorial creates an unusual challenge for his agency.

"The inviting aspects of it worry me somewhat, but we will . . . initially abide by the designer's intent," he said. "I don't think we can stop people from climbing on the statues for pictures...People will come into the water displays."

Goldstein will discover how much he needs to worry when the memorial opens to the public after the official dedication by President Clinton on May 2.

"We've been through memorial dedications before, although they have all been smaller ones," he said. "We are used to getting ready for a presidential visit. The real crunch will come after he leaves, and the memorial is in our hands. The visitation will be tremendous."

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The Park Service already has eased its no-touching policy at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where the wall is close to the visitor walkway and people are encouraged to take rubbings or just place their hands on the name of a loved one.

The display of waterfalls that Goldstein thinks will attract splashers is in the last of four plazas that follow the sequence of Roosevelt's four terms in office.

It announces itself with a thundering roar of water cascading down a brown granite wall, loud enough to drown out passing airplanes. Five steppingstones lead from the walkway through a pool to one of four waterfalls, an invitation to hop along the line of granite blocks and stand beneath a shower of cool water.

Although Park Service officials say they are not going to worry about tourists climbing on the Roosevelt statues, they were concerned about another hazard: visitors being hit by baseballs from the five diamonds near the site. To shield visitors from spectacular hits, a high berm was built on the west side of the memorial site.

Goldstein said his biggest concern after the memorial opens will be potential damage to the \$630,000 worth of newly planted trees and shrubs that make up a large part of the 7 1/2-acre, parklike memorial.

"The most fragile feature is the plant material," he said. "We will want to keep visitors from taking undue advantage and walking through the vegetation."

Rob DeFeo, chief horticulturist for the area's national parks, is the person who has to worry about foot traffic through the 1,000 dark pink azaleas and the care of newly planted blue pines that reach 25 feet into the sky. He walks the memorial grounds, pointing to American elms and winterberry bushes with the familiarity of a man showing off his own garden.

DeFeo said the Park Service insisted that the memorial incorporate only trees that have proved durable in Washington. "You have to pay attention to the tree's biological needs, and we did that," he said. "A guarantee comes with the trees, most for a year. That's our protection. We will be watching all of them very carefully."

For now, money is not a problem, Goldstein said. Congress, recognizing the need for a larger budget to cover the FDR Memorial, set aside \$575,000 for this fiscal year and \$700,000 for next year. He said the Park Service already had on staff all the experts needed to maintain the additional memorial, and he plans on hiring only a few new groundskeepers.

"Each memorial has its own nuances and differences," he said. "They are each unique and they each become learning experiences. We endeavor to make this one, like the others, last many lifetimes."

Illustration

PHOTO: Frank Johnston; CAPTION: Steppingstones lead to a waterfall where visitors will be able to splash and cool off. Managing such features is a new challenge for the Park Service.

Credit: Washington Post Staff Writer

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