

## **PUBLIC ART COMMISSION MEETING**

A regular meeting of the Public Art Commission took place on Thursday, March 12, 2009, at 5:30 p.m. in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Conference room at 344 Broadway.

### **The following members were present:**

Gregory Williams  
Teri Hensick  
Mags Harries  
Cynthia Smith  
Miriam Stewart  
Julie Graham

### **The following members were absent:**

Stephanie Boyé

### **Also present were:**

Jason Weeks, Executive Director  
Lillian Hsu, Director of Public Art and Exhibitions  
Jeremy Gaucher, Public Art Administrator  
Charles Sullivan, Director of Historical Commission

The meeting began with introductions and Lillian stating the goal of the meeting – to revisit the PAC consideration of Ted Clausen’s public art proposal for a Prince Hall Memorial on Cambridge Common. Jason summarized the project to date. The PAC is being asked by the City Manager to revisit their review with only aesthetic criteria in mind. Jason, Lillian, and Charlie had met and agreed that it would be helpful if Charlie joined this discussion to lend the Historical point of view and to answer questions regarding the decisions to date of the Historical Commission (HC). It was also decided that PAC should join the Historical Commission review of the Prince Hall Memorial proposal on April 2, so that both Commissions could be informed of the other’s comments before making final recommendations.

Charlie stated that any physical change that is publically visible in a historical district of the City has to be reviewed by the Historical Commission and given a Certificate of Appropriateness to its surroundings. The concept of “appropriateness” is not clearly defined in the statute. Therefore the Historical Commission looks at the context and makes an informed decision as to its architectural and historical appropriateness.

Charlie and Jason stated that the experience of the Irish Famine Memorial (when the HC felt the concept was inappropriate) prompted the drafting of the Gifts and Donations Policy, which is the document used by the PAC in their last meeting to

review the Prince Hall Memorial proposal. It was decided at that time that the PAC would be the “gatekeeper” in the process for the review of public art proposals.

Two years ago the Historical Commission received an application, signed by the City Manager, asking for approval in principle of a Prince Hall Memorial to be placed on the rotunda area of the Cambridge Common. The HC met on site, and the Prince Hall Committee brought a large box to represent a hypothetical memorial. The HC approved in principle a monument for that location, placed in relationship to the Washington Monument, not to be figurative, and to be less than the height of the Washington monument (less than six feet).

The Prince Hall Committee then developed the process, and the current proposal was chosen. Charlie informed the PAC that applications submitted to the HC are usually for buildings and architectural proposals, and that the HC usually negotiates a resolution, each side possibly making compromises to reach a decision. Charlie offered that this may not be appropriate for a public art proposal, and perhaps the HC erred in approving this location before a review by the PAC.

Charlie informed the PAC that the Cambridge Common was redesigned in 1975-76 for the Bicentennial, and it was during that time that multiple objects from various areas around the Common were collected onto the current rotunda (e.g. the cannons were moved from the Civil War monument area). The HC approved of this design. When the current Prince Hall Memorial was proposed as another monument, the HC thought it appropriate to place it with other smaller memorial objects which had been collected onto the rotunda.

Cynthia quoted from a document she had found for the Boston Common Masterplan that placed a moratorium on any additional memorials until a policy is discussed. Cynthia asked Charlie what he thought about the issue of memorials – how many can be placed on the Cambridge Common, and when are there too many? Cynthia said that the first review by the PAC of the Prince Hall proposal looked at this issue and saw a problem with the location.

Charlie said the first monument on the Common was the large Civil War monument in 1876. In 1882 a private donation placed the bronze early settler monument on the Common (a project that received significant resistance). In the 1890’s the cannons were installed around the Civil War monument. In the 1950’s a Washington monument in the form of a bronze relief, retaining walls, and benches, was placed (much larger than the current tablet). Much of that monument was destroyed in the 1976 renovation, but the current tablet was retained and installed. It is Charlie’s opinion that the 1976 renovation did much damage to the original, traditional landscape of the Common, including abandoning the tree-lined allée of the earlier design and replacing those paths with paths in different locations.

Particularly in the case of artwork proposed outside of normal construction projects, Charlie said it sometimes takes considerable political will for the Historical Commission to say no to a proposal even if the HC feels the proposal is inappropriate.

Julie asked if the HC were to conclude that the final proposal for the Prince Hall memorial were inappropriate might they recommend a different location?

Charlie said the HC had lengthy discussions about this project. Prince Hall was not a Cambridge native and left little historical record. He founded the lodge of Masons and is said to have approached Washington regarding the inclusion of African-Americans in the army. This latter point is part of the rationale for placing the Memorial near the Washington monument. Over several meetings the Prince Hall Committee presented a persuasive argument for a monument on the Common.

Greg wanted to discuss the problem of evaluating the proposal on aesthetic grounds only, when in fact any public art cannot be considered separate from its site and context.

Lillian clarified that the PAC needs to take out of the review the funding component, the artist selection process, and the possibility of other sites on the Common.

Mags stated that the PAC felt the artwork was compromised by the site, hence a discussion of the site was necessary.

Cynthia suggested that since none of the other objects on the rotunda are art objects should the Prince Hall memorial be more like the others?

Mags questioned the current directive being given the PAC to dictate taste, when this has always been a realm that is avoided by the PAC, a group of individuals with strong opinions.

Lillian affirmed that the current task is an exception to usual practices and principles that guide the PAC in its review of Percent-for-Art projects and in its review for Gifts and Donations. The integrity of the PAC is upheld by their adherence to established practices and process.

Charlie acknowledged that the HC got ahead of the process by giving approval for a location of the Prince Hall memorial, putting the PAC in somewhat of a quandary.

Greg stated that when objects are placed in relationship to others, messages are created by those relationships. The messages created by the placement of historical signifiers near each other cannot be avoided. He asked, what message is created when the Prince

Hall memorial is placed in relationship to the other objects on the rotunda, and specifically in relation to the Washington monument, at a lower height? A comparison is inevitable, especially since the format of the proposed Clausen tablets resembles the Washington tablet. The current proposal establishes itself in formal dialogue with the Washington monument but ultimately trumps it by being a little shinier, busier, and in greater number. The current proposal also pays homage to more than one individual. It traces a historical legacy of African Americans becoming emancipated and independent through the voices of many. Perhaps this is a reason to be separate from the Washington monument.

Charlie clarified that the cannons are Revolutionary War cannons and do, in fact, relate to the Washington monument and that the Historical Commission explicitly stated that the Prince Hall memorial had to be “subsidiary” to the Washington monument. However he noted that the lower stature of the Prince Hall memorial has been compensated for by the greater width and number of tablets in the current proposal.

Julie directed the discussion to the aesthetic considerations. Charlie answered a question that the PAC had had, stating that the cobblestones on the rotunda will be replaced in the next renovation to conform to ADA standards. The shape of the rotunda may change at that time as well. Cynthia repeated from the last discussion that the turnaround dimensions need to be refined by the artist for ADA compliance.

Regarding the text in Ted’s proposal, Greg mentioned the unknown ratio of attributable text that Ted would use and the text that is ambiguous. Mags mentioned the readability – at what level would the quotations be placed? It was also noted that the text, which is a large aesthetic component of the artwork, is still unknown as to content, placement, surface area, and style, size, and color of fonts. There was a concern that after all the text is placed on the stones there may be too little free space. Mags proposed another question of accessibility – once text is used as a dominant feature of the memorial, ought it also be offered on the stones in Braille?

Julie commented that the design feels busy with text and the placement of the forms, and she wondered if the artist’s desire to invite people in and imagine themselves as a stand-in for the sixth tablet in the circle might be ill served by the somewhat confrontational and funereal format of the design. Additionally, there is no opportunity for landscaping or a softening of the forms. Greg agreed that the format of enclosure and the dimensions of the circle make a possibly claustrophobic interior. The shapes do not invite one in, and the randomness of the collection of objects on the rotunda contributes to the feeling of there being too many objects for the size of the space. Miriam mentioned a concern for safety, seconded by Charlie, that often arises with an enclosed space, at this scale, created by the opaque barriers of the tablets.

PAC members all agreed that the artist had given the site and concept much thought and the idea of working with the schools to select texts is great. Jason informed the Commission that Ted had already made contact with the school. Ted has created a sense of interactivity with his choice of the polished reflective interior surfaces, allowing the visitor to “put oneself” into the history. Cynthia thought it was a good artistic decision to incorporate contemporary leaders and writers like Maya Angelou and Barack Obama into the text. The granite material chosen by the artist is an excellent material in terms of maintenance. Additionally, Ted’s proposal fits the proposed budget. Mags thought the proposed schedule would not give enough time for full classroom work. Charlie contributed that there is not much hope for a September 2009 installation since the HC will be seeing the proposal for the first time on April 2, 2009, and it would be unusual for them to approve it on the spot. If they send it back for revisions the next review would not be until May.

Greg asked if the PAC would feel a placement of the artwork in the middle of the lawn would improve its effectiveness, since the rotunda site seems to exacerbate the aesthetic issues. Charlie suggested that the PAC could make that recommendation to the HC, and they might reassess the designated location and consider an alternative place on the Common. Miriam pointed out that if the location were to be different the artist may envision a different design altogether. Greg reminded the group that during the first review of the proposal the PAC had steered away from a critique on aesthetic grounds because (1) the Gifts and Donations Policy and the established customary process of the PAC places aesthetic considerations outside of their purview, and (2) the PAC felt the artistic potential was too restricted by the site.

Charlie said there is a purpose to having a dialogue between monuments but that these particular placements do not necessarily have a good reason to be on the rotunda. He offered the Historical Commission opinion, coming from perhaps a traditional view of history, that George Washington was the more important historical figure. PAC members discussed the power of art vs. a generic monument. What was the purpose of commissioning an artist? If the goal was to have a new memorial that would not upstage the Washington memorial, might a strong contemporary work of art overwhelm the Washington monument by virtue of its aesthetic quality, regardless of its dimensions? Some felt that the current proposal may overwhelm in spite of its lesser height because of its five elements, as well as their shape, size, and color.

Teri predicted that the artist may be asked to reconsider some of his design. Mags emphasized that the artist should be paid if he has to do redesign work.

Charlie recommended that the PAC participate in the April 2 HC meeting and then write a recommendation in a subsequent meeting after that date. It was noted that the Mayor, the Prince Hall Committee, and the artist would be attending April 2. The PAC discussed the process of actively reviewing the proposal with the HC at the meeting or

just attending and offering comment if called upon. It was decided that at least Greg and Teri would attend as representatives of the PAC.

A few related questions followed:

Jason asked Charlie if the HC would ever make a decision to prevent future memorial settings. Charlie informed the group that the HC does not have the authority to set policy for the Common, but the City Council could. The HC can only approve or disapprove individual projects.

Mags asked Charlie about the African-American trail, which would add significance to a Prince Hall Memorial. Charlie said there are fourteen markers, not really a trail like the Boston Freedom Trail, but that a Prince Hall Memorial would certainly be an additional marker. Cambridge has fourteen buildings and plaques in almost every neighborhood. The nearest one to the Common is in Harvard Square at the entrance to an office building. The fourteen plaques are all tributes to individuals who lived in those locations. Prince Hall never lived in Cambridge.

Lillian said she would draft the minutes and recommendation and send to all present for review and edits.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:30 p.m.