

Can We At Least Discuss This Approach?



The proposed gilded arch at Memorial Circle is not just an aesthetic mistake. It is a direct assault on one of Washington's most carefully designed civic sequences and the country's most hallowed ground.

That sequence begins at the Lincoln Memorial, crosses Arlington Memorial Bridge, passes through Memorial Circle, and continues along Memorial Avenue toward Arlington National Cemetery and Arlington House, the home of Robert E Lee. These are not separate landmarks that happen to align. They form one ceremonial approach held together in one sight line.

Now Donald Trump wants to put a “triumphal” arch on that axis. To understand why that is such a profound violation of the capital's design, it is instructive to review the report of the McMillan Commission, created by the Senate in 1901 and named for Senator James McMillan of Michigan. The Commission comprised four of the most consequential designers in American history: architect Daniel Burnham, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., architect Charles McKim, and sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Like Pierre L'Enfant, the Commission did not think of the public areas of Washington as a collection of impressive objects, but rather as a composition.

Washington, the Commission wrote, had been planned with careful attention to the “reciprocal relations” among public buildings. “Vistas and axes” were not decorative extras; they were part of what made the capital “a magnificent and consistent work of art.” The point was not simply to build monuments, but to protect the relationships among them.

The McMillan Commission's treatment of railroad facilities on the Mall illustrates their perspective in a meaningful way. It concluded that the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad had to be excluded from the public grounds to restore “that dignified approach to the Capitol for

which the Mall was originally designed.” The later consolidation of rail service at Union Station was therefore not simply an infrastructure decision; it was part of a broader effort to remove visual clutter from the monumental core and recover the Mall as a civic composition.

In other words, the McMillan Commission's vision, consistent with L'Enfant, was not to fill every space with an object dramatic or otherwise. It was, in part, to protect the capital's visual order. The city's grandeur comes not just from what was built, but from what was deliberately kept open.

That struggle over vistas and open space did not end with the McMillan Commission. For example, the fight over where to place the World War II Memorial was prolonged and bitter. The chosen site — the Rainbow Pool between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument — was itself a McMillan Commission element. The original 1997 design was rejected outright by both the Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission as too intrusive on the vista of the Mall. The objections never went away. They were overridden. Congress ultimately passed legislation explicitly stripping the courts of jurisdiction to hear legal challenges and ordering construction to proceed. It had to legislatively dismantle its own review framework — the Commemorative Works Act it had passed to protect the Mall — to get the memorial built.

The Mall's east-west corridor is indeed monumental. The Arlington axis is something rarer — a procession in which every element—the cemetery founded on Lee's confiscated land in 1864, the house he left to fight against the union Lincoln preserved, the bridge completed as an act of national reconciliation, the avenue named for the fallen — belongs to the same chapter of American history. The McMillan Commission did not invent that meaning. It recognized it, gave it form, and protected it. It is irreplaceable.

The National Park Service's interpretive displays mounted on Monument Avenue explain that Arlington Memorial Bridge “connects Arlington House...to the Lincoln Memorial.” Another interpretive panel makes the point plainly: Memorial Bridge is the “ceremonial entrance to Arlington National Cemetery.” A 2022 NPS viewshed analysis, using satellite imaging data, confirmed that the reciprocal view between the Lincoln Memorial and Arlington House — across the bridge and the Potomac — remains intact and is a formally documented feature of the protected cultural landscape.

In other words, the Lincoln, the bridge, the circle and the avenue form a commemorative corridor. Any arch, triumphal or otherwise, will interrupt the sequence. Anything near a 250-foot arch will commandeer it — converting the ceremonial entrance to Arlington from a passage of reconciliation, sacrifice, and reverence into what will likely be a garish display of one man's ego.

On the pages discussing Memorial Bridge and the Cemetery, Olmsted Jr. wrote that nothing “needs proper supervision and planning more than the modern cemetery,” because nothing suffers more from “vulgarity, ignorance, and pretentiousness on the one side, and grasping unscrupulousness on the other.” A cemetery, he wrote, should be a place one enters with “respect and peace, as into a church or sacred place.”

That line should stop this project cold. The obligation of reverence does not begin only after one passes through Arlington's gates. It begins on the approach. The Lincoln, Memorial

Bridge, Memorial Circle, and Memorial Avenue are part of the experience of entering Arlington Cemetery.

The proposed arch would vulgarize the ceremonial approach to the cemetery and commandeer the Lincoln-to-Arlington axis — concerns serious enough that three Vietnam veterans have filed suit in federal court to halt construction. That is why McMillan's "vistas and axes" language and Olmsted's cemetery warning are not separate arguments. They are the same argument seen from two directions.

That is also why the Commission of Fine Arts matters. Formed in 1910 in the wake of the McMillan Commission's work, the CFA exists because Washington's monumental core requires judgment independent of ordinary political appetite. The CFA is not the only body with a role in protecting Washington's monumental core — the National Capital Planning Commission, historic-preservation review through the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission all exist, in different ways, to slow and discipline decisions about commemorative works in the capital. But the CFA is the institution most directly descended from the McMillan Commission's design mandate, and the one now being asked to give this project aesthetic legitimacy.

Which makes the present Commission's role especially troubling — and especially compromised. Its current composition is not ordinary political patronage, where a president fills vacancies with friendly appointees over time. In October 2025, Trump fired all six sitting members of the Commission mid-term, leaving it vacant for months. He then restocked it entirely with new appointees before the arch proposal came forward for review. The body that voted unanimously to advance the concept was not an independent commission that happened to favor the project. It was a commission rebuilt from scratch while these projects were being advanced.

Its chairman, Rodney Mims Cook Jr., has described the project as "personal" for the president. (In fact, when asked recently who the arch was intended to honor, Trump responded, "Me."). By his own biography, Cook has spent a career immersed in classical architecture, civic design, and preservation. His vote tells us less about his architectural judgment than about the condition of the institution he now leads. The question before the Commission is not whether the arch is grand, classical, expensive, or presidentially desired. The question is whether it belongs where it is proposed. On that question, the McMillan Report is unambiguous.

If elected officials should carry pocket Constitutions, members of the CFA ought to carry a pocket McMillan Report — or at least read the thing before approving new monuments in the monumental core. The McMillan Report tells them plainly what Washington's guardians are supposed to protect: "vistas and axes," "reciprocal relations" among public buildings, and dignified approaches to the nation's most solemn places. The Commission's task is to ask whether a proposed structure strengthens the composition or violates it.

This arch would not. The Commission of Fine Arts should be the body most capable of saying so. Its job is to protect Washington's monumental order from exactly this kind of vanity: the kind that sees an open vista and, ignorant of its irreplaceable value, asks "Why isn't my monument there?"