

The Newest Monument: The Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial

*With this faith, we will be able to hew out
of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.—M.L.K. Jr.*

Washington, DC Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation

The memorial now being finished on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. will be an engaging landscape experience to convey four fundamental and recurring themes throughout Dr. King's life—democracy, justice, hope, and love. Natural elements such as a crescent-shaped-stone wall inscribed with excerpts of his sermons and public addresses will serve as the living testaments of his vision of America. The centerpiece of the Memorial, the “Stone of Hope”, will feature a 30-foot likeness of Dr. King.

Attendees of the 91st Annual Conference of National Council for the Social Studies will be able to visit the finished memorial. The Dedication of the Memorial is scheduled for August 28, 2011. Here is a brief introduction to what will be unveiled.

Site Location

The National Capital Planning Commission and The Commission of Fine Arts approved the site location for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. in December 1999. It's a four-acre plot on the north east corner of the Tidal Basin within the precinct of the Jefferson Memorial and north of the memorial to President Roosevelt. The approved site creates a visual “line of leadership” from the Lincoln Memorial, where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, to the Jefferson Memorial.

The King Memorial is intended to be personally transformative for visitors, building a sense of commitment to the promise of positive change and active citizenship. Drawing from Dr. King's own rich metaphorical language, the themes of “the Man, the Movement and the Message” are intertwined into a larger experience of place.

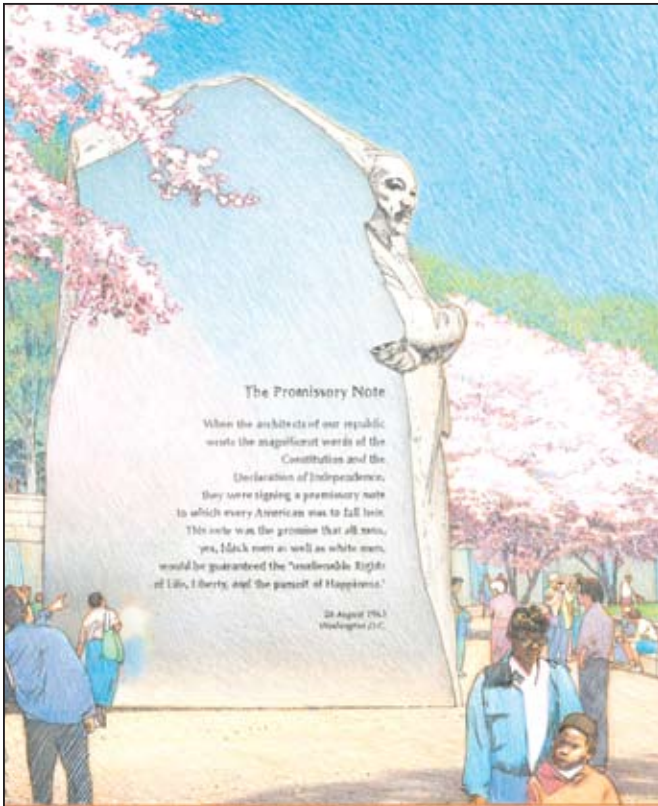
Natural elements—water, stone, trees—are used to underscore the themes of justice, democracy and hope. These are not composed to impose a didactic message, but overlap with one another, adding layers of content that can be discovered by the visitor.

Water

Water is used throughout the memorial to recall most powerfully the theme of justice. Drawing on its location at the edge of the Tidal Basin, water is used as an essential element that builds on King's words and on the crescendo effect of his sermons and speeches.

The water appears throughout the memorial, but in each location, a special character is created. Within the site, the source of the water comes from the multiple martyrs' wellsprings, residing in individually crafted niches at the top of the landscape berm and adjacent to the path. Each of these 24 niches and wellsprings will recount the contribution of each martyr to the movement and each will be unique to commemorate the individual. Wellsprings will be hewn out of the stone (“rough on the outside, smooth on the inside”) and will create a contemplative environment for reflection.





From these quiet niches adjacent to the elevated walkway, individual streams will flow out over the wall and form a part of the larger torrent cascading down a water wall. This wall, in turn, will be punctuated by turbulent water tumbling over textured surfaces and will contrast the large smooth surfaces of polished granite, glistening with text, chronologically arranged to recount the major freedom struggles of King’s life.

Stone

Hewn stones with smooth surfaces (“every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain”) are used throughout the memorial to display the different ways King and other civil rights activists acted out their faith that the democratic ideals of the founding fathers (symbolized by the Jefferson Memorial) can be realized through struggle and sacrifice.

At the entry portal, two stones are parted and a single stone is pushed back in the horizon, appearing as the missing piece of what was once a single boulder. The smooth and polished sides of each portal stone contrast the rough surfaces of the boulder. On the one side, the theme of hope is presented, with the text from King’s 1963 speech cut sharply into the stone: “With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.” On the other side are inscribed these words: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Together, and at the threshold of the Memorial plaza, the themes of justice and hope are introduced and are juxtaposed with democratic ideals, forcefully brought into visual focus by

the presence of the Jefferson Monument in the distance, across the Tidal Basin.

Beyond this portal, a single stone appears to have been thrust forward, wrested from the boulder and pushed forward, within the frame of view of the Jefferson Memorial. On it, King’s words are inscribed: “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the ‘unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness’ ... We refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.”

The sculpture of King himself is about 28 feet tall, taller than the statues of Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson that are also on the Mall. A full-scale model was first sculpted in clay, and then carved in stone.

Trees

Large, majestic trees—oaks, pines, magnolias and cherries—reinforce the spatial integrity of the Memorial and add a temporal dimension, exhibiting seasonal change and annual growth and offering opportunities for additional memorial spaces dedicated to other heroes, such as Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer, of the struggle for social justice and nonviolent social change. For most of the site, the trees are planted in random masses, weaving together the cherries at the edges of the Tidal Basin with the magnolias framing either side of the plaza space or creating evergreen sentinels, marking the edges of the flanking streets. At the top of the inclined plane, adjacent to the upper pathway, a regular cadence of American oaks traces the curvature of form that embraces the site and brings into focus the central themes of democracy, justice and hope.

A Design Competition

Arriving at this design for the memorial was a very competitive process. In December 1999, the Foundation formed an international panel of architects and designers to develop and coordinate the program of requirements for the Memorial. More than 900 submissions were received from architects, landscape architects, students, sculptors, and professors representing 52 countries around the world.

In September 2000, Entry #1403 by ROMA Design Group of San Francisco was selected as the winning design. Then in 2006, Master Sculptor Lei Yixin was named Sculptor of Record. The sculptor is charged with the task of capturing not only the likeness of Dr. King, but his essence and spirit as well. Also in that year, the Ceremonial Groundbreaking occurred on November 13. Finally, in 2007, a construction firm (McKissack & McKissack/Turner Construction/Tompkins Builders/Gilford Corporation Design-Build Joint Venture) was selected as the contractor for the project.

A 2010 Competition for Kids

The Foundation sponsored a competition “2010 Kids for King Education Initiation” that raised awareness of Dr. King’s work and the memorial then under construction. PBS news anchor Gwen Ifill, actor and author Hill Harper, and rapper and singer Cornell “Nelly” Haynes reviewed the hundreds of submissions from K-12 students all across the United States and selected the winning entries. The grade 3–5 art and essay winning entries are shown in this article, courtesy of the National Memorial Project Foundation. The competition for students has ended, but young people can also still with fundraising if they wish through the Kid’s Corner webpage (through the “Programs and Events” link at www.kidsforking.org). Most of the cost of the memorial has been raised through private donations. 🌐

SIDEBAR: The grades 3–5 Kids for King art presentation was won by Francisco Haye of Brooklyn, NY; the essay category by Amanda Barry of Levittown, PA; and the video category by Gerra Gistand of Houston, Texas. See the video presentations and other winning entries and list of sponsors at www.kidsforking.org.

A Controversial Carving

Teachers should be aware that, in an echo of the news that surrounded the creation of the Vietnam Memorial in 1995, this new memorial has stirred up both praise and criticism.

First, we have an example of praise. In 2010, stone carver Nicholas Benson received a MacArthur Foundation’s “genius” grant. Benson is currently working on the four-acre landscape and stonework for the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial.

Second, we have an example of criticism. In 2006, when Chinese sculptor Lei Yixin was chosen as the master sculptor for the image of Martin Luther King, Jr., some critics claimed that “the King depiction looks more like a statue of a socialist leader than an American known for non-violent protest.” Others have said that because Lei is not black, “he doesn’t know how black people walk, how they stand, how their shoulders slope.”¹ Still others observed that the Peoples Republic of China, which has been cited for human rights abuses, should not have any part in the creation of a U.S. memorial to a civil rights leader.²

Take a look for yourself at the online photographs of the sculpture of Dr. King and of the whole memorial (www.mlkmemorial.org). What do you think about it all?

—Steven S. Lapham, associate editor, *SSYL*.

Notes

1. “What Martin Luther King Has to Do With Communist China,” From Lisa Chiu, *About.com Guide* May 23, 2008, chineseculture.about.com.
2. “A King Statue ‘Made in China’? U.S. Critics Blast Selection; Artist Is Bewildered at Outrage” By Ariana Eunjung Cha, *Washington Post* Foreign Service, Wednesday, August 15, 2007. www.washingtonpost.com.

Resources for Teachers

As part of the Kids for King Education Initiative, the Washington, DC Martin Luther King, Jr. Foundation prepared lesson plans and educational resources for teachers and youth leaders. These resources (for grades 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12, and which include timelines and handouts) are available free at www.kidsforking.org/teachers.

Kids for King Winning Entries



Dr. King's Dream What It Meant-

Dr. King had a dream, and his dream was to bring blacks and whites together. Back then blacks and whites were separated. This was called segregation. Most white people liked it that way but some wanted to move forward with Dr. King and help make his dream come true.

Dr. King had hope for what he was doing, He never gave up. He didn't like the way blacks couldn't drink from the same fountain or go to the same stores or even stand in the same line or keep their place in line. He wanted equal rights for all people black or white. Voting rights and good jobs with good pay. In his dream of peace among all people and equal rights for all he knew that it would be a better world to live in. That is why he had so much hope and faith for what he was doing. He looked to God to guide him with his journey.

The love that he never let go was very strong. His message in the "I have a dream" speech is the most famous speech of all time. Now a lot of other people including me love what he did. He was very proud of the people that supported him and humbled by their sacrifices.

I plan to bring his legacy forward by teaching my nieces and nephews what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did and tell them to teach their children about what he did. I hope that they will do that and they will learn what it really means to all people. Another thing that I will do is to never judge anyone because of the color of their skin. Really we are all the same on the inside. We may have different points of view on things but we are all humans and need to love each other. Everyone that has a dream can look at how hard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. worked for all of us to live his dream and we can realize that if we can dream it we can achieve it.

Even if your friends don't feel the same way about what Dr. King did you should still keep his dream alive in your heart and try to be a good example to others who are not. It is what Dr. King would have wanted.