

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In an issue of the American Institute of Architects Journal devoted to Kansas City, the city's sixty-eight-year-old monument was singled out:

Kansas City's principal landmark for the past half century has been Liberty Memorial . . . [Magonigle's] 217-foot shaft emerging from classical pavilions is one of the largest Great War memorials anywhere.<sup>1</sup>

Though it certainly is that, Kansas City's Liberty Memorial is now and has been more than a conspicuous landmark. In City of the Future, published in 1950, Kansas City's centennial year, the authors describe the emotional involvement of Kansas Citians with the conception and realization of the Liberty Memorial which had been for many years their chief symbol.

The recklessly ambitious Liberty Memorial movement characterized Kansas City in its rambunctious 1920s. At no time in the city's history had its leadership been more confident of manifest destiny . . . It was a saturating movement that reached to all corners of the city.<sup>2</sup>

The Liberty Memorial movement was far more fundamental than just the plan to erect an important civic building. It must have been like the peoples of a Medieval town banding together to create a

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<sup>1</sup>"Kansas City's Principal Landmark . . .," Journal of American Institute of Architects 68 (March 1979): 86-87. A dramatic double page photograph of the Liberty Memorial by Patricia Duncan would almost seem to be a keynote for the issue devoted to Kansas City.

<sup>2</sup>Haskell and Fowler, City of the Future, 115-117.

cathedral. Kansas City's Liberty Memorial was an American product of times which had not existed before, and which had a relatively short span, and probably would never be experienced again. It is difficult for us now, near the end of the twentieth century, after the Second World War and with assorted hostilities both completed and ongoing, and with the possibility of imminent nuclear disaster before us, to recreate the circumstances in which the Liberty Memorial was born. As I have pointed out, that fleeting mood seems to have changed even before the Memorial's completion. In the beginning there seems to have been an atmosphere of near euphoric exhilaration and self esteem. There must also have been a mood of patriotic idealism only slightly based on practicality.

It is significant that the type of memorial which had been chosen was "A MONUMENT PLUS A BUILDING, not for utilitarian purposes, but to house trophies of the war with other matters closely related thereto."<sup>3</sup>

This nonutilitarianism seems to have been viewed as a virtue — a sort of nonfunctional purity which is hard to appreciate now. In fact, the purpose of the Liberty Memorial was to articulate an abstract idea.

To forever perpetuate the courage, loyalty, and sacrifice of the patriots who offered and who gave their services, their lives and their all in defense of Liberty and the Nation's honor during the World War.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the task of erecting an abstraction "without

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<sup>3</sup>Wording on the official ballot. See Fig. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Liberty Memorial Association, "Program," Cover page.

taint of utilitarianism,"<sup>5</sup> the competition to select the architect was phrased in lofty language and was purposefully unspecific. Thomas R. Kimball's Liberty Memorial competition was much like that he had designed for the Nebraska State Capitol, one "seeking a man rather than a plan."<sup>6</sup> "Both [competitions] attracted much attention by reason of their brilliancy" and their goal of striking off "the bonds of style and tradition."<sup>7</sup> The winning architect in the Kansas City competition was a man, who from his photographs, speeches, and credentials seemed perfectly to fill the role. H. Van Buren Magonigle, it seems, would have been equally at home on the stage of a theater or the rostrum of a university lecture hall.

Kansas Citians surely must have been impressed with the architect from New York and with his visualization of their Liberty Memorial. Some months after Magonigle's selection, a lengthy article in the Kansas City Star informed citizens that not since the time of Dinocrates and his Pharos of Alexandria -- some twenty-five centuries ago -- had there been such an architectural concept as the Liberty Memorial, nor such an architect!<sup>8</sup> "Comes now Magonigle to Kansas City

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<sup>5</sup>Liberty Memorial Association, "Memorial Service," 1934. ". . . without taint of utilitarianism," suggests that utility would have been a corrupt concept.

<sup>6</sup>Liberty Memorial Association, "Program," 1 and "Minutes," 395. J. C. Nichols reminded the Board of Governors that it was the architect and not his design which had been sought in the competition.

<sup>7</sup>"The Competition for a Memorial for Kansas City," Western Architect 30 (July 1921): 69.

<sup>8</sup>Kansas City Star, 22 October 1921, quoted Fred K. Irvine, editor of American Stone Trade in "How Kansas City Leads the World."

with a total eclipse of the ancient Grecian master and his work."<sup>9</sup>

The Liberty Memorial experience must have broadened artistic and historical horizons in the Heart of America. Well along in the building of the Memorial when its cornerstone had been laid, Mr. Magonigle shared his prowess as a historian with Kansas Citians in a 1924 Armistice Day dinner speech:

. . . [It was] Pericles . . . who with the aid of Pheidias, Ictinus, Callicrates, Mnesicles, all the glorious company who wrought upon the Acropolis, [and] made the City of the Violet Crown the cynosure of the human race. The fame of Athens rests not upon the memory of her merchants . . . but upon her artists, her philosophers, her poets.<sup>10</sup>

Kansas City, he said, would be a veritable New World Florence, Venice, Paris, or Rome reflecting "the resplendent genius of Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Donatello, Brunelleschi, and a brilliant galaxy of other artists and scholars."<sup>11</sup>

His profession had been invited:

. . . to create . . . on the hither edge of Penn Valley Park, a thing new in the world . . . a great architectural group dedicated solely to things of the mind and spirit.<sup>12</sup>

One can only wonder at his prophetic 1924 admonition:

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Kansas City Times, 12 November 1924. Magonigle's Knife and Fork Club dinner speech given 11 November 1924. A typescript of the speech, "To Mr. & Mrs. Hughes Bryant as a souvenir of a delightful day spent with them on Armistice Day - 1924," is in the Liberty Memorial Museum Library and Archives and was printed in its entirety by Kansas City's press.

Magonigle's putdown of Athenian merchants seems to suggest the New Yorker's lack of sensitivity toward Kansas City businessmen supporters as well as underscoring the architect's own egotism.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.



Men and women of Kansas City do not let your vision fade! Do not permit any adverse influence to dissipate it! Do not, I adjure you, allow this great idea to fail of fruition, to disappear like a house of cards, to crumble like a rope of sand.<sup>13</sup>

Thoughtful review of voluminous clippings as well as private Liberty Memorial Association minutes and correspondence gives evidence that the Liberty Memorial movement was early fanned to a pitch nearing hysteria. In the beginning, raising pledges for more than \$2 million, cheered on by a four-block-long phalanx of school children marching twelve abreast and the marshalling of 2,500 workers had been in itself an emotional binge. The public participation in neighborhood meetings and the choice of "A MONUMENT PLUS A BUILDING," topped off by the competition -- a sort of architectural Olympics -- all surely stirred feelings and expectations past reality. In retrospect, the 1921 site dedication with the five Allied leaders, a great river of marching Legionnaires, and an unprecedented ocean of spectators all seem to have had a surreal, dream-like perspective. It was almost as if the drama's climax came in the first act!

The United States, reluctantly drawn into a World War, then embracing it with patriotic fervor, had emerged triumphant. As we look back, it might seem that the Liberty Memorial movement was an effort by a far removed city to prove its mettle -- even to make expiation for the lives of those 440 sons and one daughter lost in the distant conflict. Perhaps this is a farfetched theory but something of the sort must have been present. A mere architectural response, no

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid. Magonigle's warning about fading vision came a year and a half after the Board's nonaction on his nomination of his wife as designer of sculpture for the north wall.

matter how sublime, was surely going to fall short. Given economic restraints aggravated by differences among leading participants, the outcome finally arrived at could hardly have been other than an anticlimax.

It would seem that the pared down and incomplete Liberty Memorial dedicated in 1926 immediately followed by a public free-for-all between the Kansas City Board and their architect had been a letdown. Their memorial was big, but not as big as Magonigle's inspired and inspiring renderings had led Kansas Citians to expect. It was noble and commanding but in its unlandscaped condition when viewed from end to end with buildings and shaft aligned, it no doubt looked skimpy -- two dimensional. Even today, although mature trees bond it more securely to its lofty perch, when viewed end-to-end, it looks thin.<sup>14</sup> Sixty years ago, Henry H. Saylor lauded Magonigle for cutting away verbiage that tended to obscure the simple truth.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it can be said that the Liberty Memorial as it was actually constructed presents spare, clean-cut, future-facing north and south facades far superior to the monumental complexities of the architect's original design -- a look perhaps more appreciated now than then.

It is really impossible to make comparisons between what might have been with that which is, to compare "the road not taken" with

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<sup>14</sup>For example, when viewed from Southwest Trafficway about 24th Street with the flanking steps hidden, the huge structure looks disconcertingly narrow -- stage set-like.

<sup>15</sup>Henry H. Saylor, "The Liberty Memorial, Kansas City," Architecture 55 (January 1927): 1.

the familiar way. However, it seems to me that when the soaring shaft and its base had to be thrust back between flanking buildings rather than projecting forward, there was a serious loss of dynamics. Of course, it was this drastic foreshortening which resulted in the great unbroken north wall and its need for embellishment. It was over the treatment of the wall that Magonigle and the owners had their final disagreement. Theoretically, it would have been desirable for its architectural creator to have brought construction of the Liberty Memorial to completion by overseeing approaches, landscaping, and the frieze for the north wall. However, given the obvious alienation between Magonigle and the Liberty Memorial Association Board as well as the architect's myopic insistence on his wife as frieze sculptor, any further relations between the New Yorker and the Kansas City owners were impossible.

The patriotic sculptural frieze which the Liberty Memorial Association Board was willing to accept, and was finally able to afford after painful delay, leaves something to be desired. Although the frieze's high relief and large scale make for a somewhat uneasy alliance between sculpture and architecture, Amateis' frieze is probably preferable to the attenuated and high-placed band of engraved figures which H. Van Buren and Edith Magonigle had conceived. Today, with the trees flanking the frieze grown into maturity, the wall and the memorial itself do give the appearance of having been born from the hill.

Definitely on the positive side, both the north and south approaches are admirable in their elegant simplicity. The stately monument's north face, now a bit softened by trees, is indeed a



memorable image. (Fig. 25) From various vantage points, Kansas City's memorial erected to honor patriots of that first World War cuts eloquent patterns against the sky. Those who approach the Liberty Memorial from the south are confronted by a vista both exhilarating and inspiring. The serene effect produced by the soaring shaft and bracketing sphinxes uplifts both our eyes and our spirits. Those ancient symbols with wing-covered faces have been shorn of traditional trappings and historical encumbrances to become timeless in their solemn vigil.<sup>16</sup> The Liberty Memorial is itself abstract and as such may be seen as a forerunner of American Art Deco, "architecture far ahead of its time."<sup>17</sup>

Physically, the Liberty Memorial has held up remarkably well. It has been nearly two-thirds of a century since the first concrete was poured according to the plan Magonigle devised to provide stability. The Memorial's statistics are impressive. These are the figures in the 1929 Liberty Memorial history.<sup>18</sup>

Concrete . . . . .	302,000 cubic feet
Reinforcing steel . . . . .	609,000 lbs.
Wooden forms for concrete . . . . .	200,000 ft., board measure
Limestone:	
Shaft . . . . .	54,932 cubic feet
Memorial Court, walls & steps . . . .	31,067 cubic feet
Memory Hall & Museum building . . . .	20,206 cubic feet
Sphinxes . . . . .	<u>9,954</u> cubic feet
Total	116,159 cubic feet

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<sup>16</sup>In conversation, Kansas City architect, Richard Farnan, pointed out that Magonigle's wing-veiled sphinxes had been conceived as neither male nor female, neither Egyptian nor Greek in derivation, thus giving a timelessness to their unceasing vigil.

<sup>17</sup>G. E. Kidder Smith, The Architecture of the United States, vol.3, The Plains States and Far West (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1981), 409.

<sup>18</sup>McPherson, Liberty Memorial, 1929, 37.



The place that the Liberty Memorial came to hold in architectural history and literature is probably less prominent than Kansas City promoters and its architect had envisioned. One of the most glowing published comments on it came from English writer, Harry Collinson Owen, in his 1929 American travelogue, The American Illusion. Even though Owen viewed the Memorial when still unfinished, he praised it saying:

. . . in all the British Empire there is no memorial so majestic as this . . . Kansas City gave the best and most majestic it could build. The pillar of fire from the tall column will become famous. So does contemporary Kansas City, the beginning of the old Santa Fe trail, insure that its history for the future is secured.<sup>19</sup>

As it turned out, that attractive forecast for the Liberty Memorial's future fame was something of an overstatement.

Because H. Van Buren Magonigle had been the winning architect in the competition for Kansas City's memorial, he and the Liberty Memorial were compared with Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, a giant among architects, and his winning design for the Nebraska State Capitol of the previous year. Magonigle had also entered the Nebraska competition but his traditional Federal plan had not placed. In the Kansas City competition, Goodhue's fourth-placing design had received much attention in architectural publications.<sup>20</sup> The winning designs by

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<sup>19</sup>Harry Collinson Owen, The American Illusion (London: E. Benn, 1929), 53-54.

<sup>20</sup>"Competition," Architecture 44, 235, 238. Magonigle's and Goodhue's descriptions were printed side by side. Those of the second and third place winners were printed on the following pages. Although Goodhue had died in 1924, his prestige was evident in Hamlin's The American Spirit in Architecture, 220, 229-230, when his fourth place design received as much attention as Magonigle's first place entry.

both architects underwent changes and the architects themselves had serious problems with their clients.<sup>21</sup> "Hostile aftermaths of both the Nebraska and Kansas City competitions"<sup>22</sup> must have been keenly disappointing to Thomas Kimball who had been architectural advisor in both of the competitions and his high hopes for harmony between architects and clients. While necessary changes in Goodhue's "Tower on the Plains" brought about fuller integration, the same cannot be said of Magonigle's Liberty Memorial revisions.<sup>23</sup>

In The American Spirit in Architecture, 1926, Talbot F. Hamlin praised Magonigle's Liberty Memorial, saying:

. . . the controlling idea is not classic, nor Gothic; it is American . . . a design of great emotional power . . . an attempt, brave -- almost foolhardy -- [to give expression to] the pent-up and sentimentalized emotion of a whole people.<sup>24</sup>

In 1928, both Fiske Kimball and George H. Edgell commented positively on Magonigle's simplicity of motive and contrast between vertical and horizontal on a grand scale in his competition design.<sup>25</sup> However, Edgell pointed out that as it was actually built, "the happy feeling of transition from the horizontal base to the vertical shaft" was lost and that sculptured figures at the shaft's top failed to emphasize its

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<sup>21</sup>Grossman, "Two Postwar Competitions," 268. Although Goodhue was subjected to state investigations and censured by a legislative committee, Grossman sees Magonigle as faring even worse!

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Grossman, "Paul P. Cret," 1980, 85-86.

<sup>24</sup>Hamlin, The American Spirit in Architecture, 229.

<sup>25</sup>Kimball, American Architecture, 208 and Edgell, American Architecture Today, 277.

monumentality. Nevertheless he declared the Liberty Memorial to be ". . . a refreshing attempt to get away from the trite and conventional in monumental design."<sup>26</sup>

Plans for the Liberty Memorial along with H. Van Buren Magonigle's description were featured in the prestigious Masterpieces in Architecture in the United States, 1930.<sup>27</sup> The Kansas City monument was not, however, in the 1932 Federal Architect poll.<sup>28</sup> It must be remembered that the Liberty Memorial was still in its incomplete and unlandscaped condition at the time. That, no doubt, was a serious detraction. By 1935 when it was finally completed, enthusiasm, even interest, in war monuments had faded to be replaced by the need to cope with dire economic realities.

In the Plains States and Far West volume of G. E. Kidder Smith's The Architecture of the United States, 1981, the Liberty Memorial is described as, "One of the finest memorials to the American dead of World War I."<sup>29</sup> Erecting the monument that was to be, "— a

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<sup>26</sup>Edgell, American Architecture Today, 278.

<sup>27</sup>Edward Warren Hoak and Willis Humphrey Church, Masterpieces of Architecture in the United States (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), 17-25.

<sup>28</sup>Grossman, "Paul P. Cret," 1980, 86. While none of Magonigle's works were chosen, four of Goodhue's were selected, giving further evidence of the high position the dead Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue continued to hold in the world of architecture.

<sup>29</sup>Smith, Architecture of the United States, Vol. 3, 408.



symbol not of War, but of Peace, and the dawn of an era of Peace,"<sup>30</sup> in Kansas City had verged on the melodramatic from the pre-1918 Armistice impulse to its anticlimactic completion and fourth dedication seventeen years later.

In a thoughtful feature article in the Kansas City Times, September 3, 1935, the week following Magonigle's death, the writer likened the architect's acclaim to the flame he had envisioned -- initially flaring with popularity, then dimming before criticism and strife.

A new personality had entered the city at the heart of its most cherished enterprise. He came as a prophet with a flaming design which seemed destined to dominate the life of this section for centuries . . . a vision . . . an unaccountable flash of genius. His prophet's words were touched with high poetry . . . until his death . . . the hand of H. Van Buren Magonigle was on the artistic life and attitudes of Kansas City.

At the outset the difficulties probably were principally attributable to the excess fire of his genius . . . a design that could not be completed with the money available. When the [revised] Memorial gradually took form . . . criticism mounted and Magonigle became bitter [about references to] a "smokestack" or a "cement factory."

The final break . . . came with the refusal of the board to give the contract for sculpturing of the north wall frieze to Edith Magonigle . . . their theme the whole story of civilization . . . the master stroke of the great Memorial.<sup>31</sup>

In the elegiac tribute, the journalist spoke of growing appreciation and support for Magonigle's "gigantic design" with "the

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<sup>30</sup>Liberty Memorial Association, "Program," 8.

<sup>31</sup>Kansas City Times, 3 September 1935.

passing years having softened the discord." Once again, the high drama of the Liberty Memorial's earlier dedications with their distinguished guests of honor was recalled. Once again, Magonigle's poetic words were repeated:

. . . as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire  
by night . . . poised serenely . . . in the center of  
the city's daily life . . . a reminder of the supremacy  
of the spirit.

Today's bystander, aware of such cherished hopes, may feel perhaps as I have come to feel, that expectations so lofty could hardly have been satisfied with a response of stone.