

Sculptor unveils model for Vinegar Hill monument

by Brian Wheeler | Friday, August 22, 2014 at 9:11 p.m.

A community that saw its homes and businesses razed now has a clear view of a shining monument that will permanently honor the past and, at least the sculptor hopes, spark conversations about the future.

Thursday at the [Jefferson School City Center](#), New York-based sculptor Melvin Edwards shared a small model of his monument to Charlottesville's largely African-American neighborhoods of [Vinegar Hill](#) and [Garrett](#), which were razed in the name of 1960s-era urban renewal.

"When I was told about the project ... I said, OK, you have to go to the place and see what it's like, get a feeling for it," Edwards told an audience of about 50 people in the historic [Jefferson School](#) auditorium. "I found people here who I actually had connections with without knowing. I met people who had very similar experiences."

"The Jefferson School's existence and renewal are very similar to things that happened in Houston, where I grew up," Edwards said.

The Jefferson School was built as an African-American public school in 1926 and its origins can be traced back to 1865. The school closed its doors in 2002 and the building fell into disrepair.

In January 2013, a \$20 million historic restoration project was completed, creating a home for community nonprofits and the African American Heritage Center. Edwards' sculpture will one day be placed outdoors next to the school.

According to city officials, the sculpture is the first commissioned work about the community's shared history in 88 years. The earlier works were those sponsored by philanthropist [Paul Goodloe McIntire](#), including statues honoring Confederate [Civil War](#) Gens. Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

"This commission was part of a jury process," said Elizabeth Breeden, a committee member of the city's Dialogue on Race. "The jurors, who were well-educated people with a lot of understanding of public art, said, 'Pick Mr. Edwards.' His reputation is there and he is seen as the interpreter of the black experience in the urban environment, as well as the black experience in education."

Breeden said one challenge is that Edwards tells a story in "an abstract form."

"He does a very good job of saying, 'This is for you to engage with, it is not for me to explain, it's for you to enjoy.'"



Credit: Andrew Shurtleff, The Daily Progress
Sculptor Melvin Edwards presents his model for the Vinegar Hill monument

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- Renowned sculptor selected to create Charlottesville's first commissioned work in decades

Andrea Douglas, executive director of the African American Heritage Center, participated in the selection process and said the jury steered away from more representational artists who would focus on human figures and a narrative.

“In thinking about this project and thinking about siting this here, we had to think about what we were trying to say with the work,” Douglas said. “It really needed to transcend at the same time it captured a history.”

Edwards, 77, said the monument was conceived largely in his Plainfield studio.

“In the case of this sculpture, I have used some elements which are quickly recognizable like chains, or squares, or other geometric forms,” Edwards said. “In part, it could look like a piece of architecture or a building.”

The sculptor said chains in history were a response to the need for a stronger rope, not something created as a tool of oppression.

“I hope this piece of sculpture is a reminder that we have to do things and look at them from many points of view,” Edwards said. “Human beings had a common experience here and can be reminded that they can do something about the future.”

“I appreciate this because it is so mysterious,” said Albemarle resident Uriah Fields. “It’s such a glamorous piece, were it not for the chain I would have some serious questions as to whether it really represented Vinegar Hill and what we have come through as people.”

“That chain says a lot to me,” Fields added. “I don’t see anything to criticize ... I say, ‘Thumbs up. Wonderful.’”

Local artist and sculptor Earl Gordon grew up in Charlottesville and attended the Jefferson School. He said when viewed at the angle he likes the most, the sculpture conveys an Art Deco feel.

“This piece has some controversy and I think that’s good,” Gordon said.

“You can have many interpretations of the chains, but for so many of us we are reminded of shackles,” Gordon said. “It seems to me another image could have been chosen besides chains ... but that is going to cause some great discussion.”

Another audience member asked Edwards about what appears to be a smaller pair of circular pieces sitting next to the sculpture.

“That was to remind you that big things come from smaller ideas,” Edwards responded. “It’s not the first time I have used devices like that.”

Douglas said the abstract nature of the sculpture would facilitate more creative responses to Vinegar Hill’s history.

“If you placed the same sculpture in another site, the dialogue would be completely different,” Douglas said. “The fact that this is not a pure site really does allow this piece of art to speak to the history without actually representing it.”

The full size version will take a year to assemble and be at least 12 feet tall. It will be built from 10,000 to 12,000 pounds of stainless steel at an industrial fabrication facility in Trenton, New Jersey.

Breeden said she has promised to raise the \$200,000 to \$300,000 in funds needed to complete the sculpture from outside the community, primarily through grants. She plans to spend a year on fundraising and then Edwards will spend a year fabricating the sculpture.

“I hope the piece is a continual reminder that what has been is what has been, but what tomorrow brings is what we do and contribute,” Edwards said.



Sculptor Melvin Edwards and Andrea Douglas, Executive Director of the African American Heritage Center
Credit: Andrew Shurtleff, The Daily Progress