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## Vinegar Hill sculptor hears ideas from the public

By Graham Moomaw



The renowned artist selected to create a monument to Vinegar Hill was in Charlottesville last week to kick off the creative process that will eventually produce the city's first publicly commissioned sculpture since the 1920s.

Melvin Edwards, a New York-based sculptor, was selected earlier this year to produce a work to commemorate Vinegar Hill, the black neighborhood that was razed in the 1960s in the name of urban renewal.

"We must remember what we've been through. We must remember what we're capable of, and that we're capable of having ideas to develop a better future," Edwards said as he described his work at City Hall on Wednesday night during the last of three events designed to help him interact with residents interested in the project.

The sculpture is a joint effort by the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center and the city's

Dialogue on Race program. When finished, it will be placed on the grounds of the new Jefferson School City Center on Fourth Street Northwest.

Some locals wanted details on exactly what he has in mind for the Vinegar Hill project, but Edwards could offer few specifics beyond the idea that the monument should have a contextual tie to the surrounding area.

“That’s the ballpark, if you will,” he said. “What our details will be, we’ll see.”

Edwards’ past works are mostly abstract, geometrical sculptures made of stainless steel. Many of his sculptures contain elements meant to resemble pieces of chain, but Edwards said that imagery isn’t necessarily intended to evoke thoughts of slavery or lynching.

“When you talk about theme in the work, I hope my titles provoke people to think more,” Edwards said, “to meditate on the realities, and from more than one direction.”

On his recent trip, Edwards visited the renovation project to scope out the site.

Though it’s too early to say what the monument will look like, Edwards has a pretty good idea of where it will go: at the corner of Fourth and Commerce streets.

“That distance from the building itself means that the sculpture doesn’t just relate to the school structure but also to the other part of the area around it,” Edwards said.

Organizers originally hoped that the monument could be installed as early as next year, but it now seems the process will take longer than anticipated.

Edwards is expected to create a small-scale model of his sculpture proposal by the beginning of next year. The model would then be used to raise enough money to make the monument a reality. Early estimates pegged the project’s costs between \$100,000 and \$200,000.

“We don’t think that will be fast,” said Elizabeth Breeden, one of the project’s organizers involved with the Dialogue on Race.

“It’s not an immediate thing,” said Andrea Douglas, executive director of the forthcoming Jefferson School African American Heritage Center. “It’s something that we are going to be thinking about for a number of years before we even see it.”

Whatever shape the Vinegar Hill monument takes, Edwards said, it will be both a reminder of Charlottesville’s past and an important step toward its future.

“Let’s hope that it’s the beginning of something, not the end of something,” he said. “I’m looking forward, really, to this project and what this community will do.”