

# The National Native American Veterans Memorial Opens on the National Mall

By Ryan McEnroe

The new National Native American Veterans Memorial opened on November 11, 2020, with a special Veterans Day program celebrating the addition of this striking memorial on the grounds of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. The memorial honors the thousands of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian men and women who have served in the United States military, including approximately 21,000 service members on active duty, and more than 183,000 veterans throughout the country today.

Planning for the memorial began in 1994, when Congress passed the *Native American Veterans Memorial Establishment Act*, which was amended in 2013 to allow for placement of the memorial on the grounds of the National Museum of the American Indian in the nation's capital. Following lengthy consultations with Native American veterans, service members on active duty, families, and community members, the Museum launched a design competition for the memorial on Veterans Day in 2017.

## The Warriors' Circle of Honor

The winning concept was submitted by Harvey Pratt, a Cheyenne and Arapaho artist and Vietnam War veteran. Pratt's design, entitled "Warriors' Circle of Honor," features a 12-foot-tall, stainless-steel circle set atop a carved stone drum. The memorial features water flowing continuously from the center of the

drum and, at the circle's base, a fire can be lit for ceremonial occasions.

The Memorial is surrounded by a circular seating area, creating a ring within a ring that can be accessed from four points of entry, aligning with the cardinal directions. Four lances stand as sentinels around the seating area, to which visitors can attach prayer cloths. A granite title wall, in which the five branches of the military are inscribed, encircles the memorial.

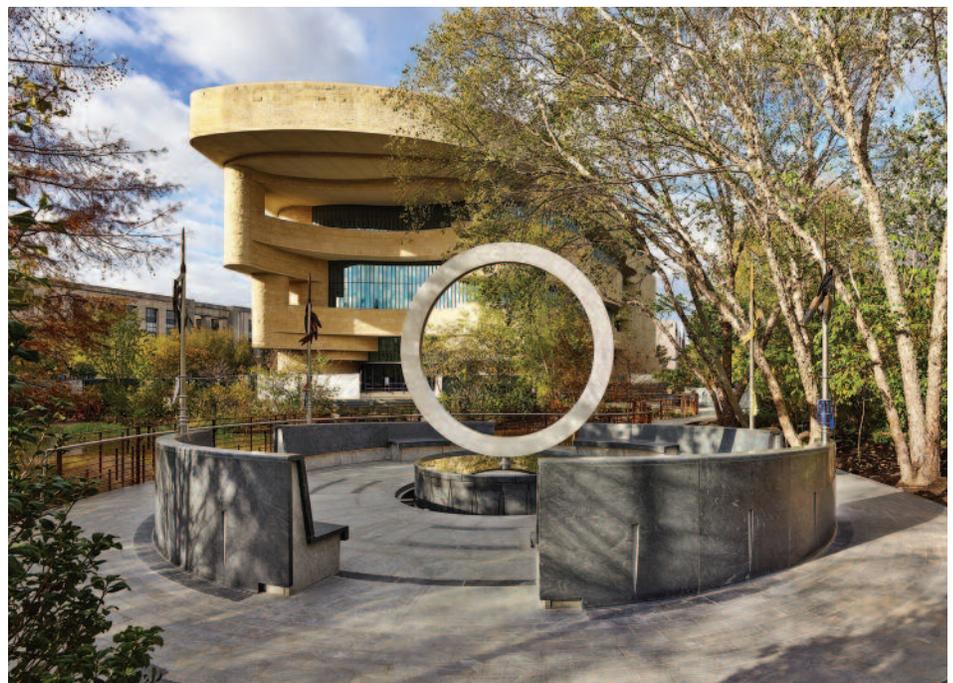
Through its symbolic elements, directional access points, accessibility, and the incorporation of fire, water, earth, and wind into the design, the Memorial is inclusive of various Native American cultural practices, as well as people of differing physical abilities. The four points of entry enable community members to enter the space from the direction appropriate to their Native American tradition. The

circular seating area was considered vital for visitors with companions who may be assisting them.

The gently sloped, curving pathway approaching the Memorial is nestled into the existing landscape and is fully accessible. A range of sensory design elements is presented in the sounds of the flowing water, for example, as well as the scents and sounds of the nearby wetlands, and traditional Native American war songs piped in through the Memorial's audio system.

## A Quiet Place for Contemplation and Reflection

Site selection was among the most challenging aspects of the Memorial's design and construction. "The Memorial was designed to be a destination, a special place to go and quietly reflect,"



ALAN KARCHER FOR NMAI, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

says Alyson Steele, FAIA, LEED AP, executive vice president of the architectural firm of Quinn Evans. Recognizing the twin challenges of a demanding schedule and a sensitive site, the Smithsonian Institution selected Quinn Evans, which has completed nearly 200 museum and memorial projects along the National Mall, to collaborate with Pratt and the Oklahoma City-based architectural firm of Butzer Architects and Urbanism to bring the project to fruition.

“The setting is a cherished landscape, with a grove of river birch trees and other native hardwoods nearby, as well as the ecologically rich wetlands,” says Steele. “It was vital to protect the forest veil while creating a secluded and peaceful place within this re-created natural setting.” The upland forest and wetlands were constructed together with the Museum in 2004.

Steele points to the curving walkway and railing as another interesting challenge. “We used laser scanning to scan the grandfather rocks along the visitor path, which are very significant. The walkway and railing had to be designed organically around these rocks.”

## A Close Collaboration

Installation of the new Memorial architecture within the constructed wetland required close collaboration between the designers, NMAI representatives, and Smithsonian Facilities experts. “Smithsonian architects, engineers, and facility managers contributed deep knowledge of the NMAI facility and provided insights to the entire team on how to accomplish this new intervention in a sustainable, resilient way,” says Lindsey Vanderdray, AIA, LEED AP, architect and design manager with the Smithsonian. “We involved the contractor during design, and they suggested techniques to save

some of the landscape in such a way that the Memorial looks as if it has always been there. We also emphasized durability and ease of maintenance, with guidance from our facility managers who oversee the long-term care of our buildings and grounds.”

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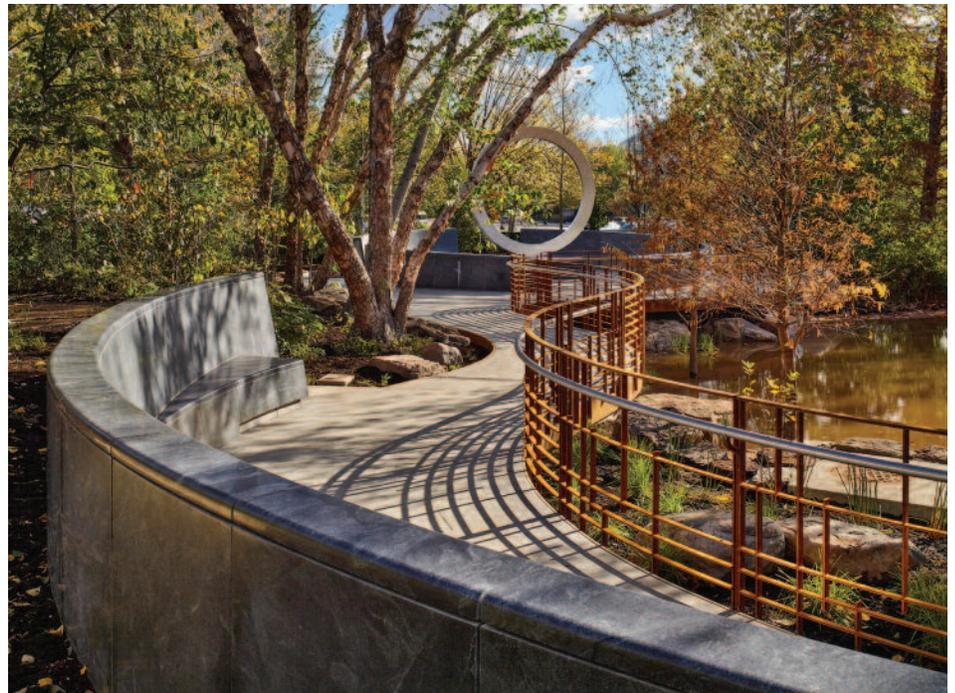
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“A lot of thought went into the choice of materials,” Steele confirms. “The materials not only serve a symbolic and aesthetic purpose, but also needed to be sustainable and durable. For items that would need to be replaced over time, we considered ease of access and installation. As an example, there is a cartridge that will occasionally

need to be replaced for the flame. That cartridge is housed in a custom steel assembly with a cover that can be easily removed to allow replacement.”

Steele notes that the schedule to complete the Memorial by Veterans Day in 2020 was the most ambitious she has faced for a Smithsonian project. “Technology and old-fashioned resourcefulness were our most important allies in completing this project on time,” she says. “This was a project that required precision in every detail. A 3D virtual charrette involving the entire team helped address a lot of questions early on. But other aspects had to be worked out by hand. For example, the lighting on the Memorial, in terms of the direction of the illumination, had to be perfectly aligned. We tested the lighting with a full-sized plywood mock-up of the ring, because the lights had to be cast into concrete long before the ring was actually in place. We also created a mock-up of the title wall’s military emblems out of pizza boxes. There were a lot of questions focusing on inches, and fractions of inches, to be sure everything was proportional and perfect.”



ALAN KARCHNER FOR NMAI,  
COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

## A Reminder to the Nation

In addition to Harvey Pratt, Butzer Architecture and Urbanism, and Quinn Evans, several other design and construction team members contributed to meeting the tight deadline for the opening. Rhodeside & Harwell provided landscape architecture services. Mueller Associates provided electrical engineering and plumbing services; AMT, LLC, served as the civil engineer; and McMullan & Associates served as the structural engineer. Fisher Marantz Renfro Stone provided lighting design, and Waterline Studio designed the fountain. HSU Builders served as the contractor.

“It was an exceptional team,” says Steele. “Everyone cared deeply about this project, and we were anxious to see it open to the public. The Native American community had waited long enough.”

“The National Native American Veterans Memorial will serve as a

reminder to the nation and the world of the service and sacrifice of Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian veterans,” said Kevin Gover, Director of the National Museum of the American Indian, at the Memorial’s dedication. “Native Americans have

always answered the call to serve, and this Memorial is a fitting tribute to their patriotism and deep commitment to this country.” 🏛️

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