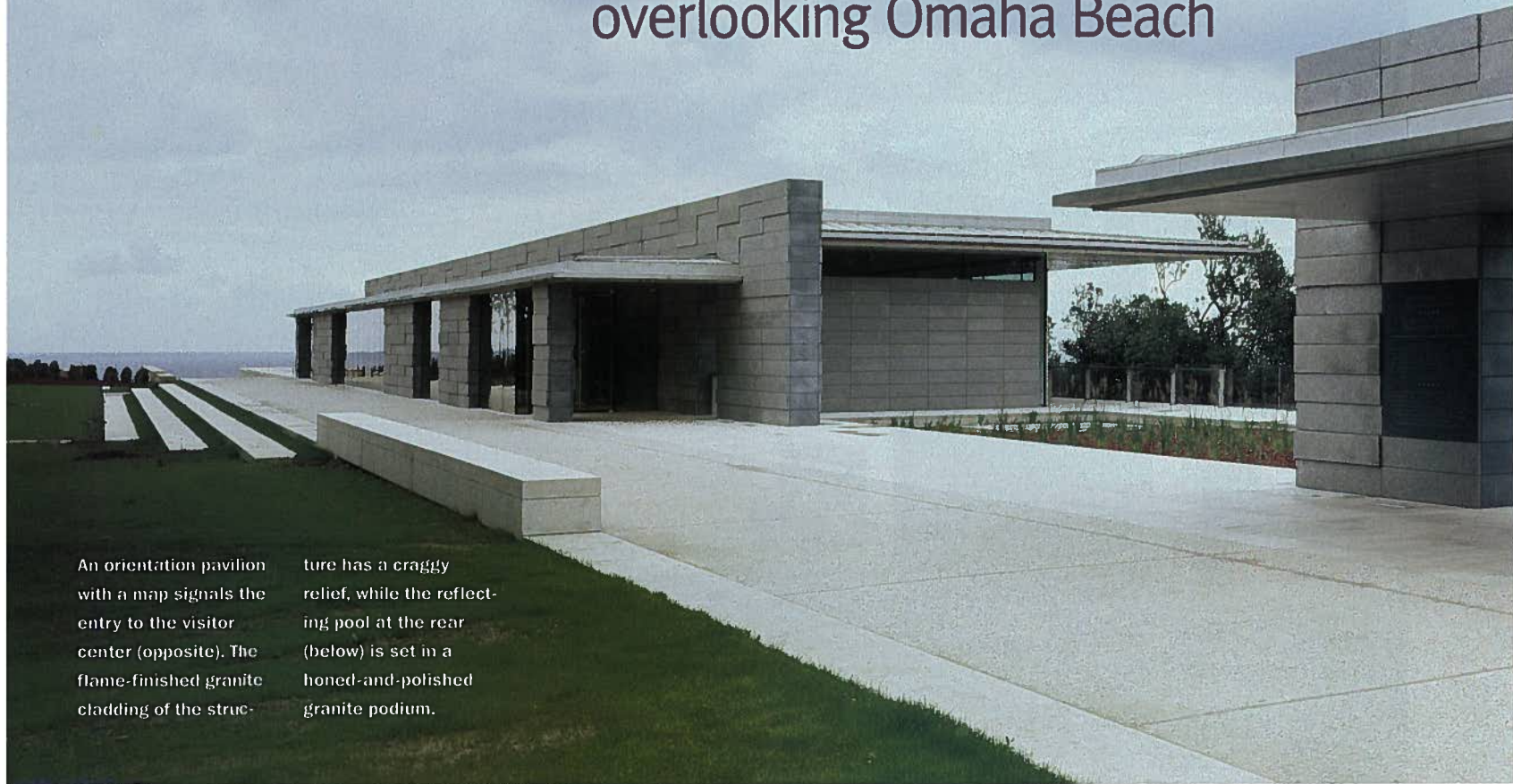


**SMITHGROUP** combines serenity and savoir  
faire in its design for the **NORMANDY AMERICAN  
CEMETERY VISITOR CENTER**  
overlooking Omaha Beach

An orientation pavilion  
with a map signals the  
entry to the visitor  
center (opposite). The  
flame-finished granite  
cladding of the struc-

ture has a craggy  
relief, while the reflect-  
ing pool at the rear  
(below) is set in a  
honed-and-polished  
granite podium.





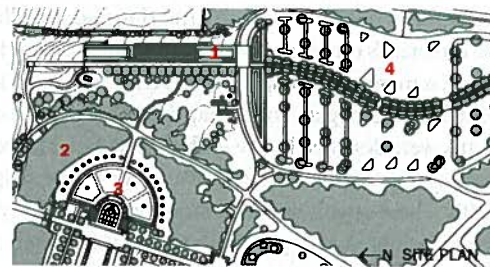


By Suzanne Stephens

**A**t a time when few know how well the design for the memorial to 9/11 in Lower Manhattan will survive various demands from separate interest groups, it might be a good idea for those involved to visit Normandy. Far above Omaha Beach at Colleville-sur-Mer, in northern France, a distinctively handsome two-level visitor center now honors those who died as a result of the allies storming the German-occupied territory on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Dedicated in 2007, the center extends along the eastern edge of the 172.5-acre American Cemetery where 9,387 soldiers are buried. The long, attenuated structure, partially submerged into a verdant landscape, is striking for its use of granite, limestone, and wood, as well as its elegant proportions and craftsmanship. Indeed, the staggered, high-relief, dark-gray granite walls recall Mies van der Rohe's demolished Monument to Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in Berlin (1926), while its rectilinear plan brings to mind Mies's house for the German Building Exhibition of 1931 in Berlin. Parts of the massing even evoke Frank Lloyd Wright's second Herbert Jacobs House in Madison, Wisconsin, completed in 1948.

Responsible for the project was the "culture studio" in the 215-person Washington, D.C., office of the SmithGroup, a 155-year-old firm that originated in Detroit. Although it now has 10 offices and more than

1. Visitor center
2. Garden of the Missing
3. Memorial
4. Parking



800 people, SmithGroup went after a commission only 30,000 square feet in size. This might seem a tad small-scale for the plus-size firm. But the high-design architects considered for the job—I.M. Pei, Michael Graves, and Hugh Hardy's firm, H3—indicate the significance of this first of many such visitor centers being planned by the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC). SmithGroup's David Greenbaum, FAIA, notes that his office probably benefited by going into the interviews with a full team in place, including an associate architect from Paris, John Lampros.

The new center occupies a 20-acre site overlooking the beach, in a more prominent location than that of the former visitor center, a small rubble-stone bungalow near the parking area. The architects deliberately gave





The dark granite walls of the lobby contrast with the white granite floor (above). From the north lobby, visitors see the reflecting pool, whose surface seems to merge with the water of the English Channel (opposite, top). Stairs from the main level (opposite, bottom right) lead to the below-grade exhibitions and elliptical gallery from which visitors exit (opposite, bottom left).

the new \$30 million structure a massing and scale that does not overwhelm the cemetery's earlier commemorative architecture dating to the mid-1950s. There, a memorial comprising a French limestone semicircular colonnade with flanking loggias, and a chapel in the form of a circular limestone tempietto, were designed by the Philadelphia firm Harbeson Hough Livingston and Larson (H2L2) in a style evocative of the stripped Classicism of the 1940s. These quietly arresting structures evocatively punctuate the gridded field of white marble grave markers, but definitely speak of another time.

With the new visitor center, the design team wanted to be referential, but not imitative: For inspiration, the architects looked at the war structures, bunkers, and surrounding granite walls on the property, as well as the hedgerows crossing the Norman terrain. The result is a steel-framed pavilion with granite walls that sits atop a poured-in-place-concrete base structure submerged in the ground.

On the lobby level, the ABMC galleries open out to the view of the English Channel to the north through expansive glass walls overlooking a reflecting pool. The main exhibition spaces devoted to D-Day are inserted underground, where spaces are darker and more enclosed. The setting, with its exposed-concrete walls, a dropped ceiling of dark stainless-steel mesh, and oak plank floors and walls, evokes the raw character

of bunkers, without the grittiness. At the same time, daylight softly filters through clerestories and skylights in the exhibition area, where freestanding display partitions loom up like rows of ancient Greek steles.

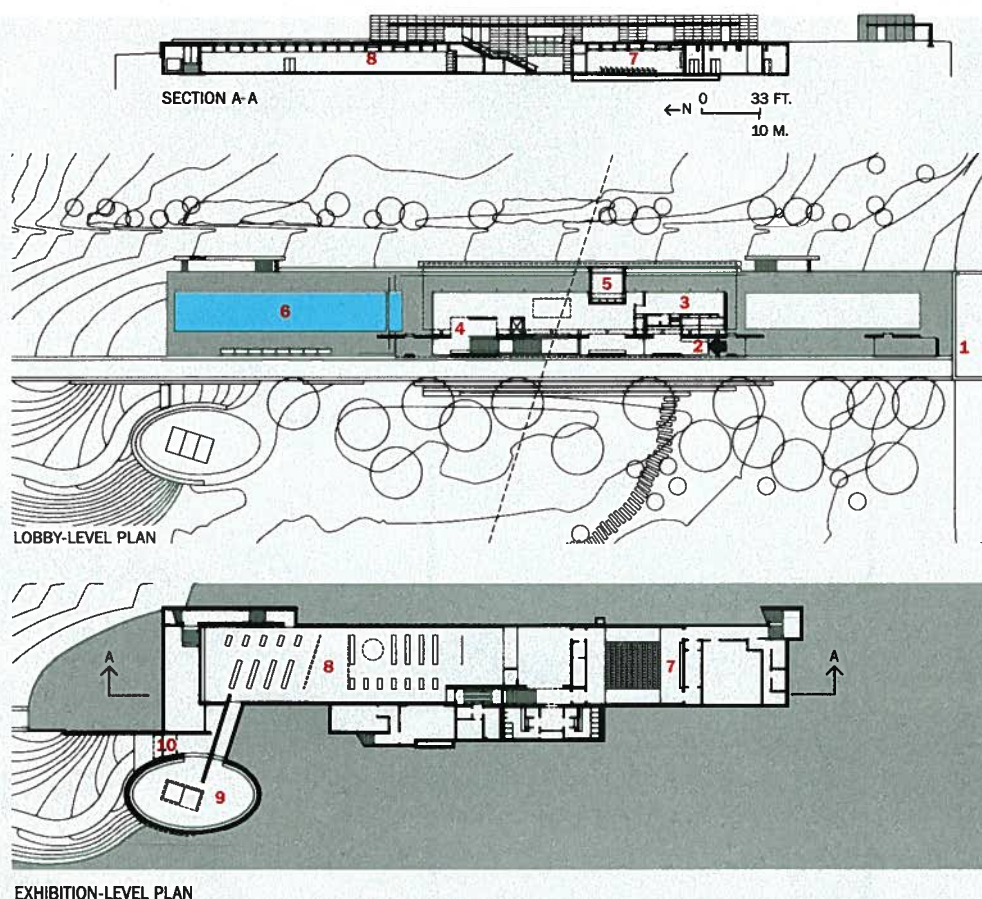
Although the exhibition is divided into three thematic sections—"competence," "courage," and "sacrifice"—its designers, Gallagher & Associates, mounted the material devoted to the history of the invasion without a hint of kitsch sentimentality. The "sacrifice" portion occupies a luminously elliptical gallery that projects from of the west wall. Acoustically treated white plaster walls keep hushed the space devoted to the memory of those who died. In the middle of the room is a skylighted meditation space, where twin cubes, composed of planes of Cor-Ten and sandblasted glass, partially enclose a helmet mounted on a rifle, a familiar grave marker during the war. The rusty steel and translucent glass indicate "a separation," says project principal Elsa Santoyo, "both wound and absence, in which the glass separates people in this meditation chamber from those in the gallery itself. Those within the chamber look ghostly," she adds. "It sets up a series of disconnections."

Visitors exit the rear of this space and follow a red asphalt path to the cemetery. Here on the exterior, the curved wall of the gallery, clad in limestone, is revealed as the site drops.









1. Drop-off and orientation
2. Entrance
3. Offices
4. ABMC gallery
5. Next of Kin Suite
6. Reflecting pool
7. Theater
8. Courage and Competence Galleries
9. Sacrifice Gallery
10. Exit to cemetery

The straightforward rigor of the lower-level installation (below left), designed by Gallagher & Associates, complements the architecture, with its metal-mesh

dropped ceilings and concrete walls. From the main exhibition hall, a tunnel (below right) takes visitors to a skylit elliptical gallery with white

plaster walls and a white limestone floor (opposite). Within the gallery, Cor-Ten steel and sandblasted-glass partitions form a meditation space.







The masterful play of materials selected for their referential qualities heightens the experience of moving through the spaces. While the architects chose a dark-gray granite cladding for its similarity to the granite used on the cemetery's perimeter, this particular stone comes from South Africa: Its warmer tone was preferred to that of the blueish Brittany granite. A flamed-finish Kashmere white granite with warm rusty veining and garnet occlusions, Santoya explains, surfaces for much of the exterior plinth, the stairs, and the main floor. "It emphasizes the horizontal framing of the views," she notes, much like those seen from the German bunkers in 1944. The floor of the Sacrifice Gallery is white limestone rather than granite, since the architects wanted to make a transition to the material used for the cemetery's memorial and chapel. Oak was favored in the lower level, owing to its longtime symbolic association with strength and endurance. The lobby and offices upstairs feature a figured makore veneer, whose watery pattern seems to echo that of the pond and channel outside. The landscaping, designed by the U.S. firm Michael Vergason Landscape Architects and D.Paysage in Paris, helps immensely to relate the structure to its coastal setting.

The integration of indoor and outdoor spaces, plus the dramatic use of daylight and views, all combine to create a particularly poetic

ambience that successfully sets up the sequence in which to enter the cemetery proper. This unified experience, incorporating history and nature, offers a serious contribution to the architecture of memorials. ■

**Project:** *Normandy American Visitor Center, Colleville-sur-Mer, France*

**Client:** *American Battle Monuments Commission*

**Architects:** *SmithGroup—Colden Florance, FAIA, principal in charge; David Greenbaum, FAIA, Elsa Santoya, project principals; Bettina Neudert-Brown, Franck Le Bousse, Su Sie Lim, AIA, design architects*

**Associate architect:** *John Lampros Architecte, Paris*

**Exhibition designer:** *Gallagher & Associates*

#### Sources

**Frameless insulated-glass panels and glazing:** *Saint Gobain*

**Copper standing-seam roof:** *TECU Zinn*

**Tile carpet:** *Interface*

**Metal panel ceiling:** *Alucobond*

**Stainless-steel mesh:** *Gontois*

**Oak and makore veneer:**

*La Fraternelle*

**Lighting:** *ERCO (track and downlights); Bega (uplighting on stone walls)*

**Acoustical plaster:** *BASWaphon*

**ONLINE:** To rate this project, go to [architecturalrecord.com/projects/](http://architecturalrecord.com/projects/).