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Local architect designs Mandela memorial

By Steve Wartenberg

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Brian Sell of Moody Nolan has won a design competition for the Mandela Memorial that will be built in California.

inspiration," Sell said of his design.

The granite-and-bronze memorial he created was recently named winner of the Nelson Mandela Memorial Design Competition sponsored by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, a human-rights nonprofit organization, and NorthStar Memorial Group, an operator of funeral homes and memorial parks.

There were about 200 entries from U.S. artists. Sell will receive a \$1,000 prize and his design will be unveiled at the Skylawn Memorial Park in San Mateo, California in late 2015.

"I worked with (Mandela) the last two years of his active life," said Sello Hatang, chief executive of the Nelson Mandela Foundation in South Africa. "And it didn't matter who you were, he made you feel comfortable and it was mainly because of his humility."

Hatang believes Sell's design will highlight Mandela's humility and further his legacy.

"It's not just about the past," he said of the foundation's goal for the memorial. "But rather it's a view of what we need to do to create a better future for all."

San Mateo was selected as the site for the memorial by the Mandela Foundation because of its proximity to San Francisco and Oakland.

California Congressman Ron Dellums championed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986. Thousands of Bay Area residents rallied for Mandela's release from prison and he visited Oakland in 1990 as part of his tour of eight U.S. cities.

Winning the competition was important to Curt Moody, one of the founders of Moody Nolan.

The goal was to create a memorial that told the story of Nelson Mandela's life, including his 27 years in a South African prison, and the courage and forgiveness that changed a nation and influenced the world.

"We talked about recreating his prison cell, but didn't want to be too literal about it," said Brian Sell, a senior designer with Columbus-based Moody Nolan, the country's largest African-American-owned architectural firm.

Instead, Sell found his inspiration from Rolihlahla, the Xhosa tribal name given to Mandela at birth by his father. It means

pulling the branches of a tree.

"It's the idea of light filtering through branches and creating a shaded area underneath where people can find shelter and

“We are a diverse architectural firm,” he said. “And we felt that for what Nelson Mandela represented to the world, who better than us to at least try and show what this memorial should be.”

Creating the memorial allowed Sell to tap into his underused poetic side.

“The competition gave us a chance to flex some muscles we don’t usually use. It’s hard to put a great story into a speculative office building,” he said, adding that he received input and critiques from several Moody Nolan employees.

The Mandela story was so great that the challenge was narrowing down what Sell wanted his design to say. To help, his design includes space for several Mandela quotes.

“My favorite is: Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world,” he said.

His design begins with three granite foundation pieces, or what Sell calls monoliths. The Mandela quotes will be etched into these granite pillars.

Three bronze pieces that represent tree trunks and branches flow up from the granite and come together to form a pool at the top of the 15-foot memorial that is approximately the size of Mandela’s prison cell. A series of shapes cut into the bronze creates a dancing pattern of shadows below.

Water also flows down from the top of the branches into a pool and then down through a series of holes.

“This is a recreation of the bars of his prison cell,” Sell said of the ribbons of water that will cascade down.

Choosing the winning design was difficult, Hatang said.

Sell’s design was selected because of “his introduction of a sense of nature into it, through the branches and the water,” Hatang said. “It represents how we can use nature to convey a message of tranquility.”

Sell is an Ohio State University graduate. He initially worked for WS Studios and then spent 15 years at NBBJ in Columbus before joining Moody Nolan two years ago. Much of his work at NBBJ has focused on designing corporate offices in China, Russia and Jordan.

“This has been a refreshing change,” he said of Moody Nolan. “We have many of the same resources as NBBJ, but more of our work is local. I can walk my kids through my projects.”

His recent projects include senior housing on the former Poindexter Village site, corporate offices and a heritage center for Honda in Marysville and the Prairie Township Recreation Center.

“I plan to take my (three) sons to see it,” Sell said of the Mandela memorial.

He hopes they and others who visit will “pause and read some of the quotes, walk around under the protective canopy of the branches and maybe start to look at the world a little differently.”

<http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/business/2014/12/10/local-architect-designs-mandela-memorial.html>