In the architects' original design, ghostly stone figures march toward a flag representing home and peace. Visitors were to take part in the journey.
A new Korean conflict

By Inga Saffron
Inquirer Staff Writer

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. — They are the kind of architects who keep a storefront office so passersby can drop in to see how buildings are made. They bicycle to work and worry about making architecture environmentally friendly. Their idea of a big project is a sixunit apartment house. A difficult client is someone who wants to panel everything in marble and mirrors.

This trio of professors — Veronica Burns Lucas, Don Alvaro Leon and John Paul Lucas — operates in a world far removed from the high-powered architectural scene of Washington. But now their State College firm, Burns Lucas, is being held responsible for starting the equivalent of an architectural bar brawl, the kind of bare-knuckles fight that can occur when art and politics mix it up in the capital.

What happened was that the little firm won a national competition to build a monument to Korean War veterans on the Mall, then turned around and sued the people who awarded the prize. The architects' Washington critics call them temperamental, elitist, inflexible, a bunch of rarified academics and, most damning of all, "those Penn State architects."

The three, all members of the faculty at Pennsylvania State University, say they are just standing up for what they think is right in architecture.

"This controversy has taken years off our lives," said John Lucas. "We're broke. We're in debt. Certain times, we feel we can't struggle any longer. We say to ourselves that the bureaucracy in Washington just works a certain way. But then our family and friends say, 'Don't give up.'"

And so, in December, the trio decided to go public after months of privately sparring with the competition organizers. At a news conference and in their subsequent lawsuit, they accused the Korean War Veterans Memorial Committee of distorting their design, transforming it from veterans memorial to victory monument.

The dispute is as much about history as it is about artistic control and the nature of memorials. The two sides can agree neither on what happened in Korean War nor on what constitutes an appropriate memorial.

What the architects intended, they say, was a memorial that would honor those who fought and died in the Korean War while also acknowledging the nation's ambivalence about the conflict. What the nation will get instead, in their view, is a temple on the Mall, a ceremonial theme park and a rewrite of history.

The revised design "leaves the impression that the architects are insecure about their ability to build a monument," according to a report by the firm's lawyers.

They feel the committee, composed of veterans and academics, was "trying to control something that they didn't understand."

The dispute has been inflamed by the architects' use of a student architect as their client. The student's father, a real estate developer, was also a client of Burns Lucas.

The controversy has spread to the university level. The state board of governors, which is charged with overseeing the university's investment fund, has directed that university funds not be used to support the suit.

"We're in a world of politics," said Burns Lucas. "Unfortunately, the university is in the middle of it."

By ANNI LANDERS

Architects John Paul Lucas (left), Veronica Burns Lucas and Don Alvaro Leon with model of their design.

Why are three State College architects in debt, on edge and out of favor?

Because they won a prestigious competition to design the Korean Veterans Memorial... and then the controversy began.
Firm's memorial design won contest -- but then lost favor

MEMORIAL, from p. 2

sion that the Korean War was a victory," complained Leon, the senior member of the Penn State firm. "In our understanding of what happened, it couldn't be called a victory or a defeat."

The contest for the project came from Congress, which assigned a committee of Korean War veterans the difficult task of commemorating "the Forgotten War." The group was allotted a site on the Mall, across from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and held a national competition for an architect. The Burns Lucas design was selected from 55 entries.

But after selecting the State College architects' plan, the veterans committee apparently had second thoughts. It now says the winning design was merely a "starting point" for the memorial. The committee also altered the design substantially. Once the Penn State architects accepted their $120,000 prize, the committee argued, they relinquished any say in the outcome of the project.

"Yes, we gave up our rights to the design," Burns Lucas acknowledged, "but I don't think that gives them the right to cut it up and change the meaning."

Robert Selstov, the attorney for Burns Lucas, said the real prize for architects in winning such a competition is not the money. "It's the good will and recognition of having your design implemented on the Washington Mall. That's what's being taken from them."

To think everything started out so well. The memorial committee received the Penn State design with great fanfare. President Buell unveiled a scale model at the White House.

In State College, the architects became celebrities, honored by the university president and interviewed on talk shows. The Nittany Lion marching band was even planned to form the outline of the memorial during a halftime show, but the spectacle was raised out.

Disagreements

The architects first noticed something was amiss with the $15 million project this summer when the Washington architectural firm of Cooper-Lecky was chosen to execute the winning design. "We would agree on one thing and something else would be developed," said Leon. When the Penn State architects complained, he said, they were told to "keep your mouths shut."

"From day one," added John Lucas, "they attempted to discredit us as weekend designers and academics."

The arguments hurt. The three professors say they always believed that the teaching and practice of architecture should be intertwined. "Teaching, they say, gave them the foundation. Our job is to scout and choose commissions compatible with their artistic philosophy, which places a strong emphasis on the role of architecture in the environment. The veterans memorial was an ideal forum for using ideas to express art."

But the idea of staging a battle scene on the hallowed Washington Mall, the closest thing to the nation's psyche, has not gone over well with the federal agencies. The Commission of Fine Arts rejected the Cooper-Lecky design in January, saying it was "unfocused and overbearing, a total shift in the spirit, concept and meaning of a project that has been thoroughly reviewed and planned for years by a group of experts."

The new variation simplifies the plan for the memorial. In this version, the 48 bronze soldiers will be honored by a mural wall featuring engravings of support troops. Fine-arts commission member George Harmon praised the approach, noting that scenes of combat are often overlooked in a type of memorial that features generals on horseback. Here, at least, "the soldiers won't be saddled on the open."

"But I don't think the purpose of this should be either entertainment or instruction. It should be memorialization."