

# Public Space & Scrutiny: Examining Monuments through Social Psychology

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**With fewer than 1 in 5 new architects identifying as a racial or ethnic minority, the field of architecture has some catching up to do in order to reflect the public for whom urban spaces are designed.<sup>1</sup> This project proposes a study of existing public spaces, monuments, and memorials through the lens of social psychology, in order to establish a broader frame of reference for future design. We are employing an interdisciplinary approach to investigate community members' reactions (e.g., stress, positive/negative associations, value judgments, perceptions of bias, inclusion, empowerment) to experiencing public spaces and monuments that memorialize contentious historical figures and events. Using a community-based participatory action approach (e.g., focus groups, survey study), we will identify elements of design (e.g., scale, materiality, abstraction, figuration, symbolism, color) that contribute to the general public's perceptions of public spaces and monuments. Data gleaned from the first phase of the research will generate the framework for the second phase of applied research, conducted through an advanced architecture design/build studio. Using a data-driven, community-informed strategy, the design/build studio will collaborate with the research team and community partners to explore proposals that work to bridge the gap between the architects and the general public when creating urban spaces marked by racial injustice.**

## OVERVIEW

Monuments and memorials have been the focus of national conversations and contention because of who and what they honor, and how their design memorializes the truth (or fiction) of our collective past. Although conversations surrounding public memory and social justice are at the forefront of design pedagogy and practice, very little of the empirical work on recontextualizing public spaces has included the voices of people of communities in which these spaces exist. This interdisciplinary research project, titled Public Space & Scrutiny: Examining Urban Monuments through the Lens of Social Psychology, examines the differences in perceptions of public monuments and aims to equip designers with the skill set to engage with communities when searching for equity, inclusivity and truth

in collective forms of commemoration. With the support of an SOM Foundation Research grant, we are exploring how community voices can contribute to shaping more inclusive public spaces, monuments, and memorials.

Our team was inspired by the growing momentum across the United States to question the relevance and legitimacy of monuments and memorials in public spaces, particularly in protest to racial injustice. Some have become public stage sets for expressing the need for change and backdrops for rallies to either keep or remove these contested objects. In our city of New Orleans, we have seen the protesting, vandalizing, and removing of monuments, and are now left with the opportunity to reimagine, rename, and recontextualize this collective history. Our research project asks how community voices can contribute to shaping more inclusive public spaces, monuments, and memorials.

Much has been written about governing bodies that have made decisions to remove or rename contentious public spaces, monuments, or symbols.<sup>2</sup> While the processes have varied, a review of documented examples suggests that some decisions are made based on a perceived incompatibility between the initial intent of an institution and current institutional values. Often these monuments and spaces present a past that is not inclusive of all perspectives and experiences at best, and explicitly racist and oppressive at worst.<sup>3</sup> For example, there is some scholarly work on divergent views of white supremacist spaces or symbols and racial bias.<sup>4</sup> The empirical work has primarily focused on confederate symbols and monuments and suggests that black participants perceive confederate symbols and monuments more negatively than non-black participants. Moreover, recent work found that the more confederate monuments a space has is positively associated with the number of lynching victims.<sup>5</sup> Much less scholarly work has focused on examining the relationship between design and racial bias which is the focus of the present work.

Phase 1 of this project builds upon Dr. Molix's program of qualitative and quantitative research focused on the interplay of bias, intergroup stress and community wellness, and extends this work by examining the relationship between racial bias and the design of public spaces and monuments. The present work



Figure 1. Existing monuments resurfaced with public protest.

(from left to right) Robert E. Lee monument on June 20, 2020, Richmond, VA ; Confederate Monument, Nashville, TN; Remaining pedestal of Christopher Columbus statue, Richmond, VA; Reverend Junipero Serra Statue, Los Angeles, CA; Contested Confederate Monuments, Richmond, VA; Columbus Statue, San Francisco, CA; Charles Didier Dreux (confederate soldier) statue, New Orleans, LA; Protesters in front of monument to Stonewall Jackson, Richmond, VA; Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C.; Jefferson Davis Monument, Ridgefield, WA

aims to better understand how and why perceptions of public spaces, monuments, and memorials vary as well as the implications those perceptions have on intergroup bias and community relations. We are employing a community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) design that centers the perspectives of a diverse sample of community members by including their thoughts and experiences in all phases of the research process. Data for Phase 1 will be collected in two parts: a series of focus groups as well as a survey study of community members and design professionals. The goal of this collaboration with architects Lin and Taylor-Welty is to use the data to formulate guidelines for creating future forms of community-centered public commemoration.

Phase 2 will build on the research of the Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design--a community outreach center of the Tulane School of Architecture with design-build and community engagement expertise. We will use the data gleaned from Phase 1 to create a community engagement process within a design-build project. In the past decade, there has been considerable momentum toward Public Interest Design and Design-Build pedagogy in architecture programs across the United States. The design-build process in architectural practice reverses the typical client-driven, top-down project delivery model and allows design teams to work directly with community partners to make collaborative decisions during the development of a built work. Using a community informed approach and data driven processes to envision and build new public spaces, we will be breaking new ground in both social psychological research and community-engaged design processes.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

We are employing both qualitative and quantitative research methods to carry out a CBPAR design including a Focus Group Study and a survey study of both community members and design professionals. The primary aim of the focus groups is to collect data on community members' perceptions of public spaces/monuments to inform the design and content of our subsequent study materials (e.g., survey, selection of monuments and public spaces). The primary aim of the survey study is to quantitatively examine the relationship between social group memberships, a variety of individual difference variables, the elements of design of a sample of monuments/memorials and a variety of outcome variables (e.g., community esteem, empowerment). At present, many of our hypotheses are tentative as very little empirical work has examined the relationships between these variables and our desire to adhere to the iterative nature of the CBPAR design we will employ to finalize our study materials. Some of our research project hypotheses include:

*H1: Individual differences in perceptions of bias/threat (e.g., racism, symbolic and realistic threat) will be directly associated with feelings of community esteem and empowerment.*

*H2: Individual differences in perceptions of bias/threat will be directly associated with perceptions of monuments (e.g., historical importance, interpretation of design).*

*H3: The relationship between individual differences in perceptions of bias/threat and feelings of community esteem and empowerment will be indirectly associated with perceptions of monuments (e.g., historical importance, interpretation of design, proximity of subject to viewer).*

*H4: The relationships between individual differences in perceptions of bias/threat, perceptions of monuments, and feelings of community esteem and empowerment will vary by social group memberships (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, education/training) and levels of identification with relevant group memberships.*

*H5: The perception of public spaces and monuments will be similar among the group of design professionals but differ from those of community members. These differences will be at least partially explained by individual differences, biases and past experiences.*

## CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT

Parallel to this work, we are conducting an architecture seminar that invites students to examine existing public spaces, monuments, and memorials--and collaborate on developing a framework for future design. Students are learning the scientific methods and protocols used in social psychological research including the ethics and compliance training required by the Institutional Review Board for working with human subjects. With funding from the SOM Foundation Research Prize, we are able to visit regional sites of collective memory and invite a host of guest speakers whose work focuses on the American monuments landscape. Speakers have included: Jha D. Amazi, Co-Director of the Public Memory and Memorial Lab at MASS Design Group; Rachel Breunlin, ethnographer and co-founder of the Neighborhood Story Project; Jose Cotto, local artist and photographer; Bryan Lee, founder of the Design Justice Platform and Colloqate Design; C.J. Hunt, comedy writer and director of The Neutral Ground documentary; Sue Mobley, Senior Research Scholar at Monument Lab; and Dr. Ibrahima Seck, Research Director at the Whitney Plantation Museum. With the distinct perspectives offered by these invited artists and scholars, students are working alongside our team to better understand varied perceptions of and experiences with public spaces and monuments.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Engagement with the community in this project will be twofold: first on an individual basis (focus group and survey participants), and later with an organization (a specific non-profit community partner will be selected by the Tulane Small Center for Collaborative Design.)

Researchers & Designers at Tulane University are seeking participants

# FOCUS GROUP STUDY

**Who:** Adults (18 and older) are eligible

**What:** Participate in a 45-minute to 1 hour discussion with other community members on the design and use of public spaces and monuments. This discussion will help shape the content of a future survey that gathers the voices of community members and design professionals. After participating in a small focus group session (5 people), participants will be paid \$20 for their time.

**Where:** Focus groups sessions will be held in-person at socially distanced locations: The Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design or at Tulane's University Square. Virtual sessions (in the participants' own space) via Zoom can also be hosted.

**When:** Focus groups will be scheduled based on participant availability.

**For more information, please contact us at:**

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SPACEANDMONUMENTSTUDY.ORG

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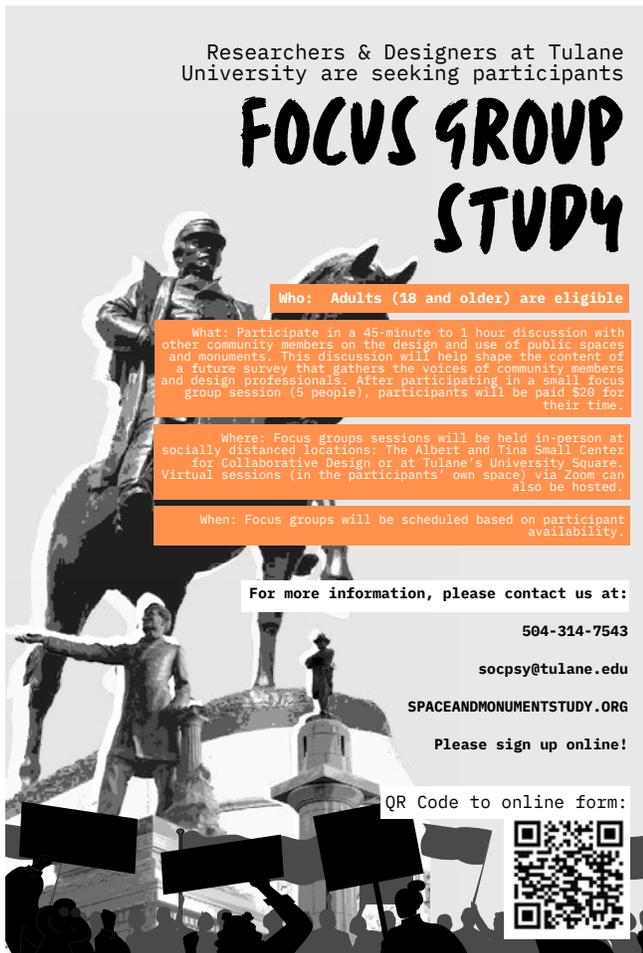



Figure 5. Seminar student Malina Packard's recruitment poster design

In the first phase of this project, we will conduct a study through the Department of Psychology, inviting individual residents of New Orleans to participate in focus group discussions that will inform the design of the surveys assessing perceptions of existing public monuments and memorials.

Our team will work with the Small Center to identify a local non-profit organization through their annual Request for Proposals (RFP) process which typically takes place in April each year. The RFP process will enable this research team to understand a range of possible projects proposed by external partners and community groups and seek a project partnership that aligns with the topic of this research. The selected organization will serve as the community partner and collaborate with our team of researchers and students for the design/build phase of this project. Utilizing the frameworks defined by the empirical studies, the team will work closely with the community partner to develop an architectural design proposal to ultimately be implemented on a specific site. In addition to the creation of a new public space, we plan to conduct post-occupancy surveys to determine the success of the project.

## PROJECT GOALS

Deliverables for this project include a completed design/build project, a public exhibition, and a website to share the data, design process, and on-going assessments of the final implementation. The design and production of exhibition and publication content will be part of the research studio coursework. These materials will feature community participants' engagement with the design process with the goal of empowering non-designers with a sense of agency through collaboration. The publication and associated website will showcase the research findings, speculative design proposals, and exhibition content of this project.

Public exhibitions, discussions, and a prospective study of this project will aim to assess whether community-informed, public interest design projects such as this can have an impact on community esteem. The Small Center is currently working with Dr. Jeanne Firth of the London School of Economics to assess the longer term consequences (e.g. networks created, economic impact, goals versus outcomes) of past design/build projects that have been completed through the community-engaged design process. We plan to apply Dr. Firth's standardized methodology of assessment to this project, in addition to conducting the post-occupancy surveys and discussions with community members.

As with all community engagement projects of the School of Architecture and the Small Center, our broad aim is to offer the unique skills and perspectives of licensed architects to translate the needs of community members and transform negative associations with public spaces where possible. The design/build process helps to expose what "architects" actually do--and offers the opportunity for more diverse young people to get involved, learn about, and hopefully pursue the profession of architecture and its allied design fields which are underrepresented by racial and ethnic minorities.

## SUMMARY

As we work to teach values of design that build a more sustainable and equitable future, we hope that projects such as this can help both students and professionals in design fields gain a deeper understanding of and commitment to the relationship between design and social justice. Our ambition is to invite local youth to participate in the design and construction processes in order to create better spaces, and reciprocally expose the field of architecture to young people in our community and work toward diversifying the future of the architecture profession.

While this research project is still in its early stages, our seminar course on topics related to public space, monuments and memorials has engendered discussions that have been difficult and perspective-changing. The interdisciplinary ethos of the class is strong and we are learning together by inviting artists and scholars from many different areas of expertise to share their work and unique framing of collective memory. We have learned how cultural anthropologists struggle with storytelling



Figure 5. Fall Seminar faculty and students visits the Peace and Justice Memorial by MASS Design Group in Montgomery, AL.

and collective authorship; heard from comedic documentarians about how they construct narratives and record histories; and discussed the mission-driven work of historians, curators, and designers for social justice. We have much work to do before we have hard data to report, but these early dialogues have shown us that traditional design pedagogies and processes are limiting, and in some cases perpetuate the same injustices we aim to address. We look forward to sharing more than just the framework of this project and invite you to follow our progress and join the conversation.

#### ENDNOTES

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