



FULL CASE STUDY: MONUMENTS & MEMORIALS

“Monuments are not innocent. We have to understand the role of monuments and other commemorative sites and activities in developing a shared narrative of the past, present, and future. These commemorations can cement memory and create and perpetuate master narratives in which one view of past events is granted legitimacy at the expense of other views.”

- John N. Low

TITLE: Chicago Monuments Project (CMP)

POLICY AREA: Art & Culture and Education

TEAM MEMBERS: Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events (DCASE), Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Chicago Park District (Parks), and Chicago Monuments Project Advisory Council.

Problem Statement

Historically, institutions across the country have erected public artwork that celebrates a complicated past. Chicago is no different; in 2020, the City recognized the need for a larger reckoning of monuments that symbolize outdated values and oppressive systems.

Reflection Questions

- What should the City do about existing monuments that are inconsistent with our collective values?
- How should Chicago memorialize its history going forward?
- Who has been left out of the stories we tell? Whose stories have been told at the expense of others?

REFLECT ON OUR PAST

The murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed ignited a real discussion about racial injustice and how it plays out in Chicago. At the height of protests, the Columbus Monument in Grant Park became a location for many high-profile demonstrations. Citing public safety concerns, Mayor Lori Lightfoot removed two of the City’s public statues of Columbus.

The summer of 2020 prompted Chicago, like many other cities, to engage in a public dialogue to understand the harm caused by public monuments and other longstanding symbols of racial oppression. Mayor Lightfoot launched the Chicago Monuments Project (CMP), a cross-departmental partnership between DCASE, CPS, and Parks to create a platform to reflect on Chicago’s values and uplift stories of all the City’s diverse residents. The participating departments are responsible for most publicly owned art in Chicago.

CMP unpacked the history associated with the City’s municipal art collection. It provided a vehicle to address Chicago’s racial history, confronted the ways in which that history has and has not been memorialized, and developed a framework that elevates new ways to memorialize Chicago’s true and complete history.

Reflections from Community “It is always good to rotate, and re-curate [a museum’s] permanent collection. We’ve all been to those museums where they haven’t done that... The city of Chicago is sort of in a similar situation. The pieces that are out there throughout the city have been placed for over a century, many of them. They were created during the Gilded Age, when people really had a very different understanding of the city of Chicago, of this country, of history. And their views have sort of grown a bit weary.” Cesáreo Moreno, CMP Advisory Committee member

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RECLAIM OUR PRESENT

From 2021-2022 CMP's work (outreach, analysis, and recommendations) was guided by an advisory committee of community leaders, artists, architects, scholars, curators, and city officials. The Committee established guiding principles for public engagement, history, and the development of new public art. The public engagement guiding principles stressed the importance of Chicago's diverse communities participating and leading conversations to create an inclusive and equitable outcome. The guiding principles for history acknowledged harmful representations shown in some monuments and the need to tell true and more inclusive stories. The guiding principles for new public art named the responsibility of the City to improve its existing art collection and develop new commissions that embrace the stories and narratives that have been overlooked.

CMP followed a five-step process to engage the public in a conversation:

1. The Committee released a list of monuments for public discussion in February 2021 on the website chicagomonuments.org.
2. The Committee requested public feedback on the list of monuments via the website and a series of public programs.
3. The Committee invited proposals for new work and monuments to be developed.
4. The Committee reviewed public input.
5. The Committee published its recommendations on the existing monuments and new work to be developed.

CMP reviewed over 500 sculptures, plaques, and artworks under Parks and DCASE's preview. Over 40 objects were marked for discussion because they represented historical figures who committed racist acts, reinforced stereotypical depictions of Native Americans, and celebrated land theft from Indigenous tribes. CPS underwent a similar process to evaluate its artwork.

The CMP committee conducted robust engagement to gain feedback on monuments under review, start a conversation on who and what has and has not been memorialized, and solicit ideas for future monuments. Roughly 1,700 people participated in 36 meetings and presentations CMP held, and CMP's website garnered nearly 2,000 responses. In addition, the committee received dozens of letters, emails, and survey responses.

After the public engagement period, CMP committed to addressing four distinct but related tasks:

- Support the development of new artwork, both to respond to and contextualize existing pieces in the collection and to address gaps in who and what has been memorialized to date;
- Establish processes for the public to identify issues within Chicago public collections and participate in determining priorities for future work;
- Evaluate and advance the recommended treatments for the 41 monuments under review, including investigating origin, historic designation status, and the structural feasibility of deinstalling or altering works;
- Invest in ongoing programs to enhance the monuments in the City's collection and the public's experience of them.

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REIMAGINE OUR FUTURE

CMP launched a \$50,000 grant program for artists and organizations to continue developing their ideas. In addition, CMP created an evaluation criteria for public artwork that prioritizes transparency and cooperation among City agencies. These guidelines informed the treatment recommendations for 41 of the 500 monuments reviewed.

CPS adopted a new policy that focuses on equity within its collection. The department plans to conduct equity audits and follow a new process to commission artwork. The Department of Capital Planning and Construction has also committed to investing in the development of new art; in the spring of 2022, the department started investing a percentage of its overall budget for public artwork, which puts CPS on par with other departments. CPS' new policy also gives community an opportunity to raise concerns and ensures appropriate stewardship.

The Chicago Monuments Project gave Chicagoans the opportunity to decide what history and narratives everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and ability, wanted to tell about the City. In doing so, **CMP helped change the culture of how these matters are decided and who should be a part of the process.**

OERJ HEALING INSIGHTS

- **Acknowledge harm.** Government has made many intentional and unintentional decisions that have caused harm. Publicly recognizing how decisions have harmed communities is a crucial step in repairing this relationship. Even when the harm is physically made of concrete, it is important to acknowledge the harm it perpetuates.
- **Create a framework to guide the work.** Building a process that uplifts shared values and decision-making can create a process that would live beyond a single initiative or an individual statue/piece of art.
- **Center community voices in the design and implementation.** The CMP integrated diverse voices from across the arts, history, government, and impacted populations. Participants did not always agree, but centering the populations most impacted helped ensure the final product was a powerful signal toward effective change

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<https://chicagomonuments.org/>



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