In the U.S., public space is historically linked with questions of equity (Low & Smith, 2005; Mitchell, 2003; Ruddick, 1996; Young, 1990). This chapter explores how public art, one aspect of public space, may advance equity for groups defined by race and ethnicity. Within public space, public art offers unique promise in this regard. This promise is linked to public art’s direct communicative potential. Public art is often explicitly intended to send “moral messages” (Mayo, 1988) and to make people think. Through both its processes and its products, public art can educate, challenge viewpoints, and promote tolerance and interaction. It can empower marginalized groups and can generate new community resources.

This chapter reviews and synthesizes existing literature on public art. Based on this review, I present a typology of strategies for how public art may advance racial/ethnic equity. I then examine how these strategies were incorporated in the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, drawing on published writings about the Memorial.

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2 Scholars acknowledge that racial categories are constructed, rather than fixed characteristics of people (Bederman, 1995). Though racial categories are not “real,” people behave as if they are (Jackson & Penrose, 1993), making race a matter of persistent importance (Omi & Winant, 1986).

3 Public art may serve also other social functions. See for example Mayo’s description (1988) of the social purposes performed by war memorials, such as conveying honor and encouraging humanitarianism.
and my own site observations. The nationally significant Civil Rights Memorial was
designed by artist Maya Lin. The Memorial was created to commemorate the U.S. civil
rights movement and its struggle to alleviate race oppression, making it an appropriate
focus for this discussion.

**Background: History Of U.S. Public Art And Racial/Ethnic Equity**

U.S. public art does not typically address equity issues. Prior to the 1960’s, most
of what was considered public art in the U.S. was of what artist Judith Baca calls
the “cannons in the park” variety (Lacy, 1995a, p. 21)—statues of mostly white war
heroes, “founding fathers,” and the like.4 Since the 1970’s, a growing public art
movement focuses explicitly on questions of equity. This self-described “new genre”
art challenges prevailing notions of public art as only artistic expression or economic
development (Lacy, 1995b; Lippard, 1995; Sommer, 1975). New genre public art has
existed in various forms since at least the 1960’s, drawing from feminist and ethnic
or community art movements, among other influences (Jacob, 1995; Lacy, 1995a;
Miles, 1997). The term “new genre” characterizes visual art projects and artists that
pointedly address social and environmental justice, including racial privilege and
oppression (Lacy, 1995a). New genre public art seeks participation by diverse publics
to create projects that these publics find meaningful (Miles, 1997). New genre art
is identified by its focus on public issues as much as by its location in public space.5
Unlike Modern era public art, which idealizes detachment and artistic “neutrality,”
new genre art challenges the false distinction between art and activism (Mâjozo,
1995).

> Rather than serving as a predictable urban décor or diversion, public
> art can be a form of radical education that challenges the structures
> and conditions of cultural and political institutions (Phillips, 1995, p.
> 61.)

New genre public art represents a promising strategy for promoting racial equity
(Gablik, 1995; Lacy, 1995a).

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4 In the 1960’s, U.S. cities witnessed the rise of a popular, community mural movement (Miles, 1997;
Sommmer, 1975, 1983). In black and Latino neighborhoods, local residents often worked alongside
“professional” artists to create community murals. These murals are not typically regarded as
“public art” by the art establishment.

5 New genre public art is also distinguished by its use of diverse media (film, performance, etc.), as
well as traditional sculpture. New genre art is often temporary in nature and frequently political
in its orientation.
Racial And Ethnic Inequity In The US

The U.S. is more diverse than ever, in terms of race and ethnicity. According to the 2000 census, 25% of the U.S. population today is non-white, up from 20% just ten years ago (American Factfinder, 2010). More than 15% of the U.S. population is now Hispanic or Latino, and this number is growing.

Racial and ethnic identity still shapes opportunity in the U.S. Some overt discrimination have been eliminated, and blatant prejudice is now less acceptable than in earlier eras (Feagin, 1991; hooks, 1995; Smith, 1989). Inequities remain entrenched, however, in income and wealth, education, employment, exposure to violence, health, residential segregation, and political power (Massey & Denton, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1986). According to the U.S. Census (2010), for example, blacks’ median income was 62 percent of whites’ in 2003. Current unemployment rates are 9% for whites, compared to 12% for Hispanics and 16% for blacks (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). And an estimated 62% of U.S. blacks and 65% of Hispanics graduate from high school, compared to 81% of whites (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007).

In seeking to minimize racial inequities, white people often focus on racial prejudice and strategies to reduce prejudice (e.g., persuasive communication, education, increased intergroup contact; Farley, 1982; Merry, 1981). Such strategies frame oppression as a problem for “other” (non-white) people—a problem created by a small percentage of (pathological) racists, and not a structural feature of the relationships between those who are privileged and those who are oppressed. An individual-level focus implies that equity can only advance by first reducing race prejudice. Strategies that emphasize reducing prejudice sidestep the crippling differences in income, education, health, etc. among U.S. racial and ethnic groups. Instead, many argue that further undoing of race privilege and oppression requires a focus on structural racism.

Racism in twenty-first century America is harder to see than its previous incarnations because the most overt and legally sanctioned forms of racial discrimination have been eliminated. Nonetheless, subtler racialized patterns permeate the political, economic, and socio-cultural structures of America in ways that generate differences in well-being between people of color and whites. Structural racism, then, refers to the system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various,
often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity in every key opportunity area, from health, to education, to employment, to income and wealth (The Aspen Institute, 2010).

Reducing structural racism emphasizes indirect and direct actions and targets the community, not the individual. The goal is fundamental alteration of how resources are distributed in U.S. society (Farley, 1982; Omi & Winant, 1986; Young, 1990). Public art that aims to promote equity can be assessed by the nature of its goals (i.e., addressing structural racism or reducing prejudice) and by its success in meeting those goals.

### Public Art Approaches To Promoting Equity

Public art may challenge oppression and privilege by promoting structural changes that transform the racial state or that fortify marginalized groups (hooks, 1995; Omi & Winant, 1986). For example, the poster campaign “Welcome to America’s Finest Tourist Plantation,” by artists David Avalos, Luis Hock, and Elizabeth Sisco, confronts national and state policies towards undocumented workers (Finkelppearl, 2001). This campaign featured posters on San Diego busses, with ambiguous images of California immigrants doing the work that sustains tourism (washing dishes, cleaning hotels, etc.). These images were juxtaposed with pictures of immigrants being locked up and deported as “illegal aliens.” The posters were displayed in 1998 while the city hosted the Super Bowl. The campaign sparked lively debates in the local media, challenging the exploitation of immigrants in the San Diego tourism industry.

We often regard public spaces—and by extension, public art—as primarily local in orientation (Ruddick, 1996). Yet art’s impact extends far beyond local boundaries. Consider, for example, the widely circulated images of the toppling of the Saddam Hussain statue, early in the U.S. war in Iraq. Extensive media coverage multiplied this scene’s impact, interpreting the destruction of this statue as a powerful (and highly manipulated) symbol of Iraqi support for U.S. actions. The following sections identify and describe ways in which public art may attempt to advance racial equity (see Figure 1).
Often, a project operates in multiple ways. As suggested earlier, direct impacts on structural racism is more desirable than reducing prejudice, since reducing prejudice does not necessarily change material conditions for people of color (though it may indirectly pave the way for later structural changes.) In general, the first three strategies in Figure 1 mostly target reducing prejudice, and the last two strategies target structural racism. The middle two strategies vary in their orientations.

**STRATEGIES TYPICALLY AIMED AT REDUCING PREJUDICE**
- Promoting commitment to abstract values
- Promoting interaction among diverse individuals
- Educating about oppressed groups

**STRATEGIES THAT MAY BE AIMED AT REDUCING PREJUDICE AND/OR REDUCING STRUCTURAL RACISM**
- Acknowledging past wrongs
- Challenging views and provoking dialogue

**STRATEGIES TYPICALLY AIMED AT REDUCING STRUCTURAL RACISM**
- Raising up and empowering oppressed groups
- Redistributing resources

Figure 1. Strategies for promoting racial equity through public art.

Often, a project operates in multiple ways. As suggested earlier, direct impacts on structural racism is more desirable than reducing prejudice, since reducing prejudice does not necessarily change material conditions for people of color (though it may indirectly pave the way for later structural changes.) In general, the first three strategies in Figure 1 mostly target reducing prejudice, and the last two strategies target structural racism. The middle two strategies vary in their orientations.

**Promote Commitment to Abstract Values**

Some public art seeks to advance equity by endorsing abstract values such as democracy, peace, and justice. For example, “Equality,” by Ken Leback and Rolon Bert Garner, offers a comment about the nature of equality in the U.S. This installation includes rows of small granite houses facing one bronze house atop a small hill in a Seattle neighborhood (Farr, 2004). Its message is reinforced via a quote from de Tocqueville’s “ Democracy in America.”

Such art has symbolic value. From a more utilitarian perspective, though, its impact on structural factors may be limited. Social science research findings confirm that people generally expose themselves to messages consistent with their existing beliefs (Farley, 1982). Thus, many who seek out such public art projects may already support the embedded messages. (Others may be exposed to such art unexpectedly.) Also, most Americans would arguably characterize themselves as supporting abstract values
like freedom or equality. Outside of specific, more controversial messages (justice or equality for whom, exactly?), art that only affirms abstract values may have limited impacts on racial equity. To increase its impact, art might reveal inconsistencies between viewers’ avowed values and their beliefs or behaviors (Davidio & Gaertner, 1999). Awareness of such gaps could produce cognitive dissonance and possible changes in beliefs or actions.

**Promote Interaction among Diverse Individuals**

The processes and “objects” of public art may promote interaction among diverse individuals by bringing them together in the experience of art. For example, in her performance art “Flesh-tones,” conceptual artist damali ayo asked employees at several paint stores to match the skin color of various parts of her body, tape-recording their conversations. The project generated discussions between the artist, employees, and passers-by. It created opportunities for participants to think critically about skin color (ayo & Roberts, 2004). William Whyte (1980) identifies the concept of “triangulation”—the capacity of public space (and public art) to bring strangers together for spontaneous interaction around shared spectacle. The art’s subject, siting, and other features shape opportunities for interaction. Superficial exposure to diverse others does appear to reduce race prejudice (Zebrowitz, White, & Wieneke, 2009), though impacts on structural racism are less likely. The typically fleeting experience of public art also limits its impacts on equity (see Merry, 1981). Interactions among diverse participants to create public art may support more sustained, meaningful connections.

**Educate about Oppressed Groups**

Public art projects may teach about the experiences of oppressed groups. For example, the “Alien Staff” project, by artist Jagoda Przybylak, equipped several U.S. immigrants with custom-made walking sticks, or staffs (Finkelpearl, 2001). The staffs incorporated elements from individuals’ own life stories as immigrants. Individuals used the staffs as props for telling difficult stories about their own immigrant experiences. This art educates about specific groups and reveals similarities in experience across groups (Hayden, 1995). Such art may help to overcome prejudice and increase understanding.
Public art may give witness to injustice and encourage empathy (Gablik, 1995; Lacy, 1995a). Such art increases awareness of oppression and calls for redress. One such example is the Indian Memorial, dedicated in 2003, and now part of the Little Bighorn Battlefield in Montana (previously known as the Custer Battlefield National Monument). The name change and the addition of an Indian Memorial to the site recognize the Indians who fought to “preserve their land and culture” in the Battle of the Little Bighorn (“Indian Memorial dedication officially scheduled,” 2002). The new monument acknowledges Indian losses in the battle and corrects an historic bias in interpreting the site. Similarly, numerous public art projects throughout Europe acknowledge atrocities against Jews in the Holocaust (Michalski, 1998). Depending on its message and its impact, such art may reduce prejudice and/or target structural racism. For example, for the Indian Memorial above, impacts could include reducing anti-Indian prejudice and/or increasing activism for Indian land rights and sovereignty (a more structural change).

Public art may prompt audiences and artists to reconsider their views and to debate important questions of oppression and privilege. For example, in the Heidelberg project, artist Tyree Guyton created a large-scale art project of found objects (i.e. artifacts not originally intended to serve as art), including a house covered in brightly colored polka-dots and a field of vacuum cleaners arrayed like headstones. The project brought attention to the city of Detroit’s neglect of publicly owned, abandoned buildings and vacant lots in this lower-income, mostly black neighborhood (Heidelberg Project, 2004). The project generated considerable attention from audiences outside the neighborhood. The city’s response, however, was limited (“Art among the ruins. Heidelberg Project,” 2004). In response to negative reactions from some neighbors, the city demolished parts of the installation. Public art that provokes honest dialogue about privilege and oppression may target structural racism, depending on the messages of the art and reactions it generates.
Raise Up and Empower Oppressed Groups

Public art projects may promote pride among members of oppressed groups, helping them to overcome past pain and giving hope for the future (Kramer, 1994; Pulido, 1996; Sommer, 1982). Such art increases the power of marginalized groups.

The creation of an affirmative identity can never be fully distinguished from resistance because the action and consciousness required to build such an identity, even if it simply allows one to live with a shred of dignity, is an act of resistance and an exercise of power itself (Pulido, 1996, p. 47).

Likewise, public art draws attention to the achievements of members of oppressed groups. Mayo (1988) describes this quality of public memorials as “conveying honor.” Such art may help groups to realize their power and potential (Májozo, 1995). Public art also creates “sanctuary” spaces for members of oppressed groups—special places apart from the weight of hegemonic society (see Day, 1999; hooks, 1990). In one poignant example, the dedication of the Civil Rights Memorial by artist Maya Lin (discussed later) was attended by the family members of almost 40 individuals who were slain as part of the U.S. civil rights movement. This occasion provided emotional solace for many (“Until justice rolls down,” 2000).

Danger exists in art that tells only “compensatory” stories. Tales of oppressed individuals who beat the odds to achieve success may create false realities, if these stories are confused for the typical experiences of group members (Hayden, 1995). Likewise, compensatory stories alone do not challenge structural racism. Instead, these stories may lay responsibility for reducing inequities on the heroic efforts of marginalized groups. These “success” stories need to be balanced with stories that acknowledge the reality of oppression for most group members (Hayden, 1995).

Redistribute Resources

Sometimes public art can generate tangible resources in marginalized communities. Public art may make these communities more economically viable and more beautiful places to live. For example, Judy Baca’s Great Wall of Los Angeles project depicts the history of women and communities of color in California. For nearly two decades, local, minority teens have been hired and trained to help paint the mile-long murals
along the channelized Los Angeles river (Lacy, 1995b). The project creates jobs for teens and introduces them to the “invisible” history of California.

At the same time, the question of whether and when to spend money on public art in marginalized communities is complicated. Art is sometimes seen as a luxury in communities with many pressing needs (Baca, 1995; Sommer, 1975).

The next section explores how many specific aspects of public art identified above can help to promote equity, by examining the case of the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama.

**Promoting Equity Through Public Art: The Case Of The Civil Rights Memorial**

**About the Civil Rights Memorial**

The Civil Rights Memorial, designed by artist Maya Lin, is a prominent, nationally recognized public art project that explicitly challenges racial inequity. The Memorial is located outside the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) in Montgomery, Alabama, USA. The Southern Poverty Law Center, founded in 1971, helps to lead the U.S. struggle for racial justice. It offers educational programs on tolerance and supports legal action in hate crime cases and tracking of hate groups (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2004). Artist Maya Lin is a pivotal figure in U.S. public art since the 1980’s.

The Civil Rights Memorial was originally the idea of Morris Dees, co-founder of SPLC, in 1988 (“Until justice rolls down,” 2001). Dees wanted to create a monument to educate about the civil rights movement and to honor the achievements and memory of those who died in the movement. These goals invoke the strategies of educating about and empowering oppressed groups, discussed earlier.

The Memorial comprises two primary elements. The first is a circular black granite table, 12 feet in diameter (Lin, 2000). Water flows slowly from the center of the table and over its edges (Figure 2). Inscribed on the surface of the table is a time line of events from the civil rights movement. The time line includes the names of 40 people killed during the movement (“Until justice rolls down,” 2001). Their deaths are interspersed with the important achievements of the movement, including its legal victories.
The second element is a curved water wall of black granite, 9 feet high by 40 feet long (Figure 3). Water flows down the wall from a pool above. The wall bears an inscription from the Book of Amos, paraphrased by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his “I have a dream” speech: “...Until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” (King, 1963). Lin’s objective in designing the memorial was to give people an understanding of the history of the civil rights movement, and to address the continuing struggle towards racial equality (Lin, 2000).

The Civil Rights Memorial may impact racial equity through the art’s location and site; the identity and involvement of the artist and the public; and the art’s message and its formal and aesthetic qualities, discussed below.

**Location and Site**

Public art does not occur in a vacuum. Its location—nation, region, city, and site—shapes its meaning and its message, including the audiences and interpretations for the art. Public art is frequently associated with urban contexts, dating at least as far back as the Modern era (Finkelpearl, 2001). Urban contexts are historically tied to the experience of difference (Day, 1999; Lofland, 1973; Young, 1990). Thus, cities hold a special place in national dialogues on race/ethnicity and power. Though many U.S. cities accommodate diverse populations (Kotkin, 1999; Lewis Mumford Center, 2001), public art is distributed unequally within cities.
Art’s siting in public space also conveys meaning. Public art is often intended for a wide audience. The artist may imagine the art as part of the every day life in a public place. Yet the privatized “public” spaces where public art is often lavished (festival marketplaces, urban waterfronts, office complexes) tacitly exclude or discourage poor people and “non-consumers” (Low & Smith, 2005; Miles, 1997).

The location of the Civil Rights Memorial is key for its role in promoting equity. Its site—in front of the respected Southern Poverty Law Center—legitimizes the Memorial as a sculpture of national significance. Likewise, the Memorial’s presence establishes the Center as a “home base” in the civil rights struggle. The Memorial’s siting calls to mind Montgomery, Alabama’s significance in the U.S. civil rights movement. The Memorial stands near the church where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached, just blocks from the first White House of the Confederacy (“The Civil Rights Memorial,” no date). The juxtaposition of the Memorial and the continued struggles of people of color in Montgomery creates opportunities for critical dialogue about structural racism in the city, as with the Heidelberg Project, discussed earlier.

At the same time, the Memorial’s location in an out-of-the-way, downtown “government” district may ensure that the Memorial is viewed mostly by intentional visitors (more than 20,000 a year) or by those with business at SPLC or nearby. Most people who experience the Memorial may intentionally expose themselves to its messages about racial justice. Opportunities for critical exchange among individuals not seeking these messages appear more limited. In terms of the strategies for promoting equity discussed earlier, the Memorial might have greater impact if, for example, it was located in a bustling shopping mall or tourist destination, in the path of individuals who are not already primed to contemplate civil rights.

The “Artist”

The identity of the artist, and the role of the public in creating art, both impact equity. Public art triggers questions about who is permitted to speak for minority communities. These questions are sometimes dismissed as essentialist (Gómez-Peña, 1995; Stimpson, 1994). And yet artists do not exist outside of specific identities—identities that are inextricably bound to public art’s meanings. Indeed, expression of an artist’s identity can itself be a political act (Jacob, 1995).

6 The content of “public” art also decreases its publicness when that content is inaccessible to the public (Phillips, 1988; in Miles, 1997.) Thus, publicness results from a myriad of psychological and other factors, beyond only physical access (Franck & Paxson, 1989).
By commissioning a renowned artist for the Civil Rights Memorial, SPLC reinforced the historic significance of the U.S. civil rights struggle and conveyed honor on its participants and on communities of color. The selection of an artist dictates who will control the art process and who will gain financially (Gómez-Peña, 1995). Some might argue that the commission for this project should have gone to a black artist. Such a choice would have generated different messages and different financial consequences from the project.

Lin is no stranger to identity issues with her art. In interviews, Maya Lin discusses how growing up as an Asian American in the Midwest shaped her identity as an outsider, and sharpened her ability to communicate as an observer (Lin, 2000). She ties her identity to her aesthetic style, which she describes as anti-monumental (Finkelpearl, 2001). Lin’s selection as the designer of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial generated considerable controversy. Some veterans were initially angered by the selection of an Asian American artist to design a memorial to soldiers who died in a war against an Asian enemy ("Maya Lin: A strong, clear vision," 1994; Lin, 2000). For both Memorials, Lin’s selection as the artist forced challenging conversations about the meanings of race—conversations that may have reduced race prejudice.

**The “Public”**

Engaging the public in creating art can promote equity, reducing both structural racism and race prejudice. By helping to make public art, members of oppressed groups exercise the power to create culture (Lacy, 1995a). Public art may help to heal oppressed communities by involving them in creating art. Participatory public art may also reduce race prejudice by promoting empathy and caring, and by fostering relationships among diverse individuals (Gablik, 1995; Jacob, 1995).

In the Civil Rights Memorial, Maya Lin involved the SPLC staff to determine how the civil rights movement was interpreted (Lin, 2000). Lin reported that she did not think it was appropriate for her to decide which people or events should be commemorated, so SPLC staff worked with historians to create the text for the Memorial. By determining what “history” should be represented, staff members exercised power over the story told by the Memorial. At the same time, Lin retained considerable authority as the artist, for example, by persuading the group that the recounting of history in the Memorial text should be “factual” rather than emotional or sensational (Lin, 2000, p. 4:28; see also Finkelpearl, 2001) (Figure 4). The involvement of broader
publics in determining the story for the Memorial—such as individuals representing diverse racial and ethnic groups or individuals involved in the civil rights movement—would have further extended the power to create culture. Likewise, direct involvement of the public in the actual making of the art would have devolved this power further still.

Figure 4. Civil Rights Memorial. Lin encouraged SPLC administrators to recount the story of the civil rights struggle in a factual manner (Finkelpearl, 2001) (Photo by author).

The Message

Public art can also promote equity through its communicative potential. The messages about oppression and privilege that are sometimes conveyed in public art can be painful. Lin suggests that such honesty is a necessary part of public art, and that only through such pain and honesty can public art promote healing (“Maya Lin: A strong, clear vision,” 1994).

According to Lin (2000), one intended objective of the Civil Rights Memorial was to educate about the history of the civil rights era—thereby reducing race prejudice and increasing empathy for people of color. Lin reports that she knew little about the civil rights movement before beginning the project (Finkelpearl, 2001; Lin, 2000). Her research into the era sharply increased her awareness of how much of this history she did not learn in school. The Memorial provided an opportunity to educate others about these events. Further, the Memorial’s time line of deaths, interspersed with achievements of the movement, was intended to convey the relationship between the sacrifices of individuals and the gains of the civil rights movement.
Arguably, the Memorial resonates most strongly as a stand against overt racism, including racially-motivated violence (e.g., murder) and legally-sanctioned discrimination. Most observers may readily accept these messages: that blatant racial discrimination is wrong and hateful, and that the civil rights movement achieved important good. As such, the Memorial promotes acceptance of general values, including fairness and non-discrimination. Today, however, the struggle for equity extends beyond outlawing overt discrimination and condemning race-motivated violence. There is a need to push beyond “comfortable” support of past gains, to ask hard questions about the continued racial disparities in income, education, etc. Saying this does not detract from the achievements of the civil rights movement or their commemoration in the Memorial. Indeed, a more confrontational message about continued race oppression in the U.S. may be unsuitable for a “national” civil rights memorial, which instead affirms broad commitment to equality. More challenging messages may be better suited to less monumental art that can engage with greater candor.

Social science research findings provide useful insights on how to reduce race prejudice in persuasive communication. Farley (1982) summarizes some of these findings, which I apply to public art. (1) To effectively reduce prejudice, persuasive communication must be heard and attended to. Thus, the public must notice public art and must direct attention to it. (2) The message of the communication must be “correctly” understood. This requirement can be problematic for public art, which frequently intends no specific message or else conveys its message too obliquely to be recognized by viewers. (3) To reduce prejudice, receiving the message must be a pleasant experience. “In your face” public art is unlikely to reduce race prejudice, though it may accomplish other objectives. (4) Finally, to reduce prejudice, the message must be retained and internalized. Fleeting exposure to public art may have less impact than, for example, the experience of art as part of a broader educational program, as at the Civil Rights Memorial.

In its message, the Memorial does not only promote abstract values. It also chronicles changes to laws and policies associated with the civil rights movement. The Memorial documents the critical role of structural factors for advancing equity—in the past and, by extension, into the future.

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7 In art, subtlety is often valued over directness. In the Civil Rights Memorial, for example, Lin (2000) equates asymmetry (such as the base of the water table) with the idea that things don’t have to be or look identical to be balanced or equal. This message is poignantly represented in the Memorial’s design and yet, because of its subtlety, the message is likely to go undetected by most observers.
Form and Aesthetics

Some critics argue that art with a social purpose is less legitimate than other, purely “aesthetic” art (see Lacy, 1995a; Pagani, 1998). Public art that fundamentally engages questions of racial privilege or oppression may be regarded more as “social work” than as “real” art. New genre public artists and others reject this false dichotomy, arguing instead that art that addresses social issues should be evaluated both on its artistic merits and on the quality of its messages (Lacy, 1995a). The Civil Rights Memorial demonstrates the potential compatibility of these objectives.

Art’s form shapes its ability to promote equity. Despite much “bashing,” the monument remains the dominant style of public art (Phillips, 1995). Some suggest, however, that less permanent, more “modest” public art forms may better support calls for social change (Phillips, 1995). The impermanence, smaller budgets, and “negotiable” development trajectories of less monumental art allow such projects to challenge views and to galvanize public involvement. Thus, as discussed earlier, the monumental form of the Civil Rights Memorial limits its suitability for pushing a more challenging agenda.

Materials also shape art’s message on equity. So, for example, in the Heidelberg Project described earlier, the use of found objects reinforced the project’s message about neighborhood abandonment. In the Civil Rights Memorial, the use of water in the art promotes abstract values: namely, the timeliness of the need for civil rights. The use of natural elements in public art can also help to create restorative spaces (Hartig, Kaiser, & Bowler, 2001; Herzog, Black, Fountaine, & Knotts, 1997; Kaplan, 1995). The Memorial’s use of water creates a soothing effect and enhances the sacredness of the site (“The Civil Rights Memorial,” no date; “Until justice rolls down,” 2001.)

Conclusions

Readers may wonder, at this point, about the overall significance of public art in the struggle for racial and ethnic equity. The relevant question, I suggest, is not whether public art is the best means for promoting equity, but whether promoting equity is an appropriate objective for public art. The answer to the latter, I would
argue, is an unequivocal “yes.” Public artists are increasingly pressed to articulate the contributions that art can make to urban settings and more livable cities (Miles, 1997). Promoting equity is a valuable part of that agenda.

Others may question the appropriateness of subjecting art to social science research to inform its content and form. I would argue that when the intention of public art is to advance racial equity, it makes sense to incorporate what we know from the social sciences to inform that effort. The strategies for public art identified earlier—educating about the oppressed, creating opportunities for interaction among diverse individuals, etc.—are essentially hypotheses held by artists (or their sponsors) on how to advance racial equity. Whether these hypotheses are supported (i.e., whether achieving these goals does increase equity) and whether a particular public art project succeeds in reaching these goals, are potentially empirical questions.

If a key goal for advancing racial equity is reducing structural racism, then public art would do well to adopt strategies with that potential. Such strategies would focus especially on empowering oppressed groups and redistributing resources, rather than on solely reducing racial prejudice. Without disparaging its laudable goals and its substantial impacts, the Civil Rights Memorial demonstrates some possibilities in this regard. For example, artist Maya Lin empowered SPLC staff by asking them to shape the stories to be told through the Memorial. Structural racism might have been further reduced by inviting broad participation of communities of color in creating the Memorial, such as through community storytelling events where residents could share their own civil rights stories as part of this research (see Hayden, 1995). SPLC might have used the creation of the Memorial to generate opportunities for artists of color, such as by hosting panels or shows of lesser-known artists of color whose work addresses racial equity, appearing at venues with Maya Lin and leveraging the attention her participation would draw. Also, staff members at SPLC could use the timeline of legal and policy victories documented in the Memorial as a basis for conversations with visitors and for advocacy campaigns on specific policy measures that target structural racism. Student visits to the Memorial could include assignments to conduct research on policy measures that are needed to reduce structural racism, building on the legal victories identified in the Memorial. SPLC could call on Maya Lin as designer of the Memorial to lend her support to specific campaigns and policy initiatives that target structural racism. Finally, the SPLC can continue to highlight the Memorial in fundraising efforts to support its work against hate crime and related activities.
While recognizing the tension between social science and artistic endeavors, opportunities for successful cross-fertilization abound (Lacy, 1995a; Miles, 1997). If artists and researchers can overcome their historical schisms, artists may benefit from the intellectual rigor of researchers, while researchers may gain from artists’ access to audiences, their command of public attention, and their potential links to action (Gómez-Peña, 1995). Social scientists can help artists think more about ways to enhance the impact of public art in reducing structural racism. In particular, researchers can articulate the underlying “hypotheses” on which public art may be consciously or unconsciously founded, to help artists reflect on the means by which they intend to promote racial equity and on possibilities for promoting structural change. Public art can inform social science research and theorizing by prompting rich insights into structural racism. Public art also offer venues for social scientists to communicate their findings, as part of efforts to reduce structural racism. The importance of this objective justifies further such efforts.
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Maya Lin: A strong, clear vision. (1994). Film by Director Freida Lee Mock. A Sanders & Mock/American Film Foundation co-production. Distributed by Ocean Releasing.


The Civil Rights Memorial (no date). Flyer available from the Southern Poverty Law Center, Montgomery, AL.