

Historical Narrative, Spatial Power, and Social Justice: The Role of Memory in Shaping the Urban Landscape of Montgomery, Alabama

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Background

We don't simply preserve and interpret the historic built environment; we encounter it. Those encounters intuitively shape our understanding of ourselves as individuals and of our shared past. What we choose to save or memorialize, whether intentionally or not, reinforces particular narratives and voices, thereby designing what memories and stories are represented in the landscape. This process is never arbitrary, but it can be difficult to perceive any direction to the narratives memorialized in public space in the context of a rapidly changing urban environment. Nevertheless, patterns are established over time, and in retrospect, it is often clear that groups holding preferential access to civic power and capital have been more successful at enshrining their preferred narrative in the public sphere. Dominant narratives have been reinforced and alternate narratives suppressed using the tools of planning and preservation.

Nevertheless, municipalities around the country have recently embarked on a process of public review, scrutinizing their monuments and re-evaluating the role that they play in commemorating the past while reflecting the values of the present. Special commissions like the Monument Avenue Commission in Richmond, VA have been tasked with making recommendations regarding a specific subset of Confederate monuments. Others, like the Mayoral Advisory Commission of City Art, Monuments and Markers in New York, were convened to scrutinize the full corpus of public monuments (but did not directly include historic buildings). These processes, while perhaps long overdue, point towards a need for greater alignment between planning and preservation practitioners moving forward.

Residents of Montgomery, Alabama, have long confronted a contentious past. Their city was both the first capital of the Confederacy as well as one of the epicenters of the Civil Rights Movement. Currently, the State Capitol building is flanked by the First White House of the Confederacy to the south, and the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church that hosted the congregation of Martin Luther King Jr to the west. A short walk from the location of Montgomery's former slave market, the Equal Justice Initiative and the Southern Poverty Law Center now lead national coalitions to continue the pursuit for social justice and civil rights.

In May 2017, in the context of a national conversation about the removal of Confederate monuments, the State Legislature in Montgomery passed the Alabama Memorial Preservation Act, requiring local governments to obtain authorization from the state before moving or renaming buildings and monuments older than 40 years. To date, this legislation has largely provided additional protection for Confederate monuments that were under consideration for removal.

Simultaneously, there have been two noteworthy efforts to elevate additional historical narratives in the city. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) successfully nominated a consortium of Civil Rights sites (including nine sites in Montgomery) to the 2018 World Monuments Watch. The Equal Justice Initiative created the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, a new monument intended to honor the victims of lynching nationwide and designed by MASS, recipient of the 2017 National Design Award.

During this moment of reflection and response, the City of Montgomery has embarked on its first comprehensive planning process in more than 50 years: Envision Montgomery 2040. The city hopes that this plan will serve as a guide for “long-term preservation, revitalization and growth.” Building on cornerstones of the community such as Maxwell Airforce Base and the Hyundai manufacturing plant, Montgomery aspires to welcome newcomers to the city. Nevertheless, in the recently released “Community Factbook,” the Envision Montgomery 2040 team barely mentions the history of the city. Montgomery’s future depends in part on its ability to recognize and integrate these diverse historical narratives and places of memory within the built and social fabric of the city.

Studio Aims and Scope

The studio is divided into the following three phases/components:

- Understanding Montgomery’s Past: Background research, documentation/data compilation
- Analyzing Montgomery’s Present: Field data collection, data analysis and findings, comparative cases
- Envisioning Montgomery’s Future: Proposal development

This studio will critically evaluate previous planning and preservation decisions that have shaped civic space and the publicly discernible historical narrative of Montgomery. Through field survey, students will describe the geographical presence of distinct historical narratives in a study area that corresponds to the extent of the city at the end of the Civil War. In partnership with students from Tuskegee University, students will analyze contemporary manifestations and interpretations of history within Montgomery’s built landscape through field survey, mapping and engagement with stakeholder organizations.

Furthermore, using historic maps of the city and the archives maintained by the Alabama State Historical Commission, students will describe how these physical manifestations of historical narrative have evolved through time, incorporating historical census data as appropriate. Students will examine the ways in which previous planning and preservation decisions have shaped civic space in the city, identifying specific instances in which these disciplines appear to have perpetuated ambient inequalities, as well as specific instances in which planning and preservation decisions were made that met the needs of the city’s residents in a more equitable fashion. Students will chart the municipal process governing how historical narratives are embodied and broadcast in the streets of the city and will make recommendations informed by stakeholder

interviews and case studies about how this process can continue to become both more accessible and more equitable.

Finally, in light of Montgomery's current work to create a master planning document that will guide the decisions of the city for years to come, students will explore interventions to further inform the work of stakeholder organizations, particularly those that are actively involved in shaping the historical narrative of the city, like the Alabama State Historical Commission, the Alabama African American Civil Rights Heritage Sites Consortium and the Equal Justice Initiative. The development of a community-driven master plan for Montgomery must intentionally acknowledge the past and engage with the present process of narrative expansion in order to better prepare for the future.

Learning Objectives and Didactic Method

This advanced studio seeks to develop student skills in mapping, assessing, and integrating cultural heritage as an instrumental component of sustainable urbanization, community development, and social-spatial justice. As a project-based studio, students work collaboratively to research, analyze, and propose recommendations for future action, compiling findings in a collective final report.

The studio is multi-disciplinary, engaging students from Historic Preservation and Urban Planning. As an advanced studio, this course is a facilitated learning experience. Through independent and collective research, data collection, and analysis, the students will shape the direction of the study and its ultimate proposals, in consultation with studio collaborators (see below). Specific learning objectives include:

- Working collaboratively on a client-driven project and report
- Locating and aggregating relevant data resources
- Developing rapid survey and appropriate data collection methods
- Mapping and visualization of urban and heritage data
- Developing and effectively communicating proposals for the integration of heritage within broader urban planning efforts.

The work of the semester will be compiled into a report (text and graphics) that will be prepared collaboratively by the students (see below). The findings and proposals incorporated in the report will be presented by the students at a final presentation on **Tuesday, December 11**.

Travel

This studio will involve travel to Alabama and all students should plan to be available for a one-week field session in Montgomery **between September 28 and October 4**. A separate travel brief has been prepared with details relating to the trip.

Collaborators

[Tuskegee University \(Links to an external site.\)](#)Links to an external site. —Tuskegee University, founded by Booker T. Washington in 1881, was the first Historically Black College or University to create an architecture department. Still guided by the founding

philosophy of “Learn to do by doing,” the department is now laying the groundwork to create a new program in historic preservation. Students of architecture and history from Tuskegee University will collaborate with the studio team, contributing to the field data collection

[Birmingham Civil Rights Institute \(Links to an external site.\)](#)[Links to an external site.](#) (BCRI) —For the past twenty-five years, BCRI has interpreted the history and legacy of the American Civil Rights movement through exhibitions and programming hosted at their museum in Birmingham. In 2017, they successfully nominated a group of 20 Alabama Civil Rights sites in Alabama to the 2018 World Monuments Watch. Since that time, they have created the Alabama African American Civil Rights Heritage Sites Consortium to support the preservation of these sites. In Montgomery, there are nine Consortium sites: the Jackson Community House, Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, Dexter Ave. Parsonage, the Dr. Richard Harris House, the Ben Moore Hotel, Mt. Zion AME Zion Church, First Baptist Brick-a-Day Church, the Trinity Lutheran Parsonage, and the Old Ship AME Zion Church.

[MASS Design Group \(Links to an external site.\)](#)[Links to an external site.](#) – MASS is an architecture firm based in Boston, MA and Kigali, Rwanda, that aims to improve people’s lives through design. Their work in the US and internationally focuses on leveraging architecture, as well as the design and construction processes, to become engines for better health, economic growth, and long-term sustainability. They designed the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery for the Equal Justice Initiative, winning the 2017 National Design Award for this work.

[World Monuments Fund \(WMF\) \(Links to an external site.\)](#)[Links to an external site.](#) – WMF has advocated for the preservation of Civil Rights sites in Alabama through its 2018 World Monuments Watch. Additionally, it is currently supporting an oral history project to more thoroughly document and archive the narratives attached with the sites of the BCRI Consortium, as well as highlight and disseminate a number of these narratives through its webpage and Alabama Public Television.

Course Requirements and Evaluation

Performance in the course will be evaluated on the following:

- Class participation
- Individual research, texts, and visuals/maps
- Contributions to: collective research/texts/visuals/maps, data management, development of field/survey/interview protocols, organizational and editorial management
- Fieldwork in Montgomery (Sept 28 – Oct 4)
- Contributions to the Final Presentation
- Contributions to the Final Report
- *All students are required to complete IRB training by the start of the semester.*

Key Dates

Sept 18 Background research first drafts due

Sept 28– Oct 4 Fieldwork in Montgomery

- Oct 23 Background research revised drafts due, Comparative case due
- Oct 30 Analysis and findings due, Proposal abstracts due
- Nov 13 Proposal drafts due
- Dec 4 Report contributions (all final drafts) due to student editors + faculty, Final review presentation run-thru
- Dec 11 Final review presentation
- Dec 14 Final report due to faculty