



Statement on The Removal of Monuments to the Confederacy from Public Spaces

their conservation if they are relocated rather than destroyed. We further recognize that, because of the divisive nature of these monuments, many museums may be reluctant to accept them or the literal and figurative costs associated with them.

Racism and brutality against people of color have ignited passions worldwide, resulting in protests against injustice and calls for the removal of its symbols from what architectural historians sometimes call the built environment. Protests outside the United States have targeted statues of slave dealers, imperialists, Nazi sympathizers, and others. Within the United States, symbols of colonialism and the Confederacy have been the focus of public rage. As our nation wrestles with the question of equality, we have seen unprecedented public acceptance of the removal of such symbols, and it seems that long-overdue change may finally be achieved.

We have seen this in calls to rename public and university buildings named for individuals with racist histories, as well as military bases bearing the names of Confederate officers. The removal of Confederate monuments from public spaces is a necessary step in the long struggle over symbols and public spaces in the United States, and we recognize that this is just one of many actions essential to ensuring that these spaces are open and welcoming to all Americans equally. While there is an urgency to this, the protesters are out in front of the public discourse; over the past few days, while this was being written, protesters toppled statues on Confederate monuments in Portsmouth and Richmond, Virginia, in Nashville, Tennessee, and in Montgomery, Alabama, among other places. The murder of George Floyd set into motion the current protests, but the debate itself extends beyond that unjust act and requires conversations about structural racism and white supremacy, and the ways in which they have been (and still are) reinforced in American public spaces.

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years after the end of the Civil War—we are still wrestling with these issues and are left questioning why a nation founded on the principle of equality continues to fall so far short of that noble and essential ideal.

These monuments make their message clear by dominating the urban realms in which they exist. More clearly than any physical barrier ever devised, they declare and demarcate “white” spaces. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, demonstrations have erupted across the United States in which Americans of all creeds and colors have demanded long-overdue systemic societal change. At many of these demonstrations, citizens have voiced the need to overcome the resistance that enables many of these unjust societal structures and practices, countering the dull murmur of social inertia with calls of not just “Why not?” but “Why not now?” Equality remains unfinished business in America.

As students of architectural history, we have been taught to look as objectively as possible at historical events, and to place them in context. When contextualized properly, symbols of oppression and societal evil can be understood in terms of what these objects meant to their creators, as separate from what they might mean to us. Some decry the removal of monuments that have stood for decades as “erasing history,” but we cannot change the events of the past. What changes is our understanding and interpretation of these past events. People made choices to erect these monuments in public spaces, and people can decide to take them down. How and why these choices were and are made is also part of history. In the United States and around the world, many objects of painful pasts, artistic and otherwise, have been removed from their original settings.

Confederate monuments are potent political symbols that cannot be viewed as neutral works of art. The blunt political message of these monuments cannot be mitigated by contextualization; no explanation of the social standards of the era in which they were installed can reduce their harm. The monuments were wrong then, and they are wrong now. It is long past time for a public recognition of this fact. SAH supports and encourages the removal of Confederate monuments from public spaces.