

SPOTLIGHT

‘Public space is not neutral’: City project reimagines its monuments and memorials

Max Blue | Special to The Examiner

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Rose Pak Station, the Muni Metro stop in Chinatown, will be the site of one of the artworks on view as part of the San Francisco Arts Commission's Shaping Legacy project.

Craig Lee/The Examiner

Public art is a hotly contested topic in San Francisco.

From privately funded art in public spaces to the narrow vision offered by many historical monuments, many locals have something to say. Now, they're getting their chance.

An ongoing city initiative asks how monuments and memorials can better reflect local communities and help to correct myopic historical narratives — and taps artists to provide the answer.

The most recent phase of the Shaping Legacy project, which has its roots in the racial-justice protests of 2020, is the placement of temporary public artworks made in close collaboration with local communities. As celebrations of The City's textile workers and paleteros — street vendors of Mexican-style ice pops — the new artworks promise to change how San Franciscans view their city while highlighting the history of under-recognized communities.

I have vocally criticized the San Francisco Arts Commission's more recent impulse to strike up private partnerships in the placement of public art, which literally use San Francisco's public space as a showroom for potential sales.

While the new artworks are also supported by an alternative funding source, it isn't one that caters to a single wealthy individual's vision for public space. Instead, they exemplify public art done right, maintaining the most important principle — an emphasis on the public.

In 2023, San Francisco received a \$3 million grant from the Mellon Foundation as part of the nonprofit's \$500 million nationwide monuments project. It would fund temporary monuments and memorials created by artists as part of the recommendations of the Monuments and Memorials Advisory Committee, which The City formed in response to the widespread protests of 2020.

The resulting temporary physical artworks, related workshops and community programs are created with the neighborhood communities they exist within and strive to directly serve them, joining celebration and education together.

Such work is not entirely new for The City.

'The City has done things to tell a more complete story, but it has been because the community has advocated for it.'

Mary Chou

Director of public art and civic art collection, San Francisco Arts Commission

"The City has done things to tell a more complete story, but it has been because the community has advocated for it," Mary Chou, the Arts Commission's director of public art and civic art collection, told The Examiner. "More change is needed."

In 2018, the Arts Commission, which oversees the civic art collection, removed the Early Days statue from the Pioneer Monument in Civic Center Plaza because its depiction of Native people had been deemed derogatory. The following year, a new plaque was added to Dewey Monument in Union Square to add context about the U.S. occupation of the Philippines.

The Shaping Legacy Project began shortly thereafter, in 2020, with the convening of the

Monuments and Memorials Advisory Committee. Made up of community members and arts professionals selected by SFAC staff and the mayor's office, The City formed the group in response to the toppling of three statues — depicting Ulysses S. Grant, Junipero Serra and Francis Scott Key — in Golden Gate Park during the protests following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police.

The City also removed the statue of Christopher Columbus from Coit Tower. Over the next five years, the committee produced an advisory report and equity audit of the 105 monuments and memorials in the Civic Art Collection.

The five participating artists in the latest phase of the project were selected from 75 applicants who responded to an open call to reimagine monuments and memorials through temporary installations and activations across The City.

Adrian Arias, Afatasi the Artist, Stacy Carter, Ariana Martinez-Cruz and Kaleb Duarte were selected based on the strength of their artistic practices that engage community and history.

"It's important that we highlight artists already doing the work of engaging with communities and shed light on the work they're doing in a public space," Chou said.

Martinez-Cruz — who was born and raised in San Francisco and attended the now-defunct Fashion Institute of Design — creates “wearable thread art” through her brand Sew Frisco, creating patches based on city neighborhoods or iconic Bay Area places and phrases.

For Shaping Legacy, she is researching the history of The City’s textile workers through archival materials and crowdsourced family stories, which people can submit in English, Spanish or Chinese.

“There is not really a solid documentation of immigrant work,” Martinez-Cruz told The Examiner. “These histories are really important to capture.”

The project also includes community mending circles, in which participants share stories of labor in their families. Martinez-Cruz hosted the project’s first mending circle at Cultura y Arte Nativa de las Americas, in the Mission, earlier this month. The next will be hosted at Rose Pak Station, the Muni station at Stockton and Washington streets in Chinatown.

The project will culminate in a 7-foot-tall temporary steel monument of a thread spool at the station, featuring appliqued images of textile workers. It will be installed in mid-August, pending permit approval.

“Getting dressed every day is one of the first rituals of daily life,” Martinez-Cruz said. “Those clothes come from two hands, whether they come from this country or elsewhere. They come from a person’s labor and dedication to craft, whether it’s fast fashion or high couture.”

Arias’ “A Sweet Route,” a tribute to immigrant ice-pop vendors, includes a statue in Parque Niños Unidos and several public performances in the Mission and Potrero Hill. It aims to shine a similar light on often-overlooked laborers.

Kaleb Duarte’s “Embassy of the Refugee,” currently on view in Fulton Plaza, also highlights the working class. The temporary piece features scaffolding surrounding Pioneer Monument, wrapped in gold mylar to honor communities in movement, either displaced or forced to move — and employing members of such communities to create the work.



Kaleb Duarte’s “Embassy of the Refugee” — seen in progress and currently on view in Fulton Plaza — honors migrant communities and their work.

Courtesy of Kaleb Duarte

“This is not just about community visibility, but about the way society organizes and what we internalize as normality,” Duarte said. “When we shift that, it allows the viewer to step back and look at labor, monuments, architecture and even time a little differently.”

Duarte’s practice of cultural production is inspired by Latin American traditions of protest art and the indigenous Zapatista movement’s implementation of the body in public space to blur theater and protest. For Duarte, it’s a direct response to the exclusionary way monuments and memorials have been used to shape public space and historical narratives.

“Some communities’ memories are not based on solid structures that tell us how and what to remember,” Duarte said. “Some indigenous traditions include engagement with the body in space. All those things are missing when we migrate and were taught to remember based on solid cement structures that the state provides. Memory is

always alive and moving rather than constantly revisiting mythical entities of the past. We're returning to our ancestral forms of making art that is not centered on an individual but a community and a collective."

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Kaleb Duarte

Born and raised in San Francisco, Afatasi the Artist also turns to genealogy to inform her artistic practice. A Bayview-Hunter's Point resident for 20 years, she has developed a "lineage-based" art practice responding to the ongoing displacement and demographic decline of The City's Great Migration community, of which she is a member. She also served on the Monuments and Memorials Advisory Committee.

"Throughout my life, I've seen the extreme displacement of my community, and I'm unsure if people understand what that loss is — loss of friends, family and very good people who are displaced and can no longer afford to live here for various reasons," Afatasi told The Examiner.

"Memory Portal 1945," a site-specific, temporary monument to be installed in Hunter's Point in mid-August, pending permit approvals, honors the history of The City's Great Migration population, which increased by some 600% from 1940-1945, as thousands of Black Americans migrated here to work in the shipyards.

The piece is a steel doorway, featuring modular tiles containing different motifs honoring the community, such as images of a Buffalo Soldier and the North Star, highlighting both the community's history of migration and its story in San Francisco.

"Public space is not neutral," Afatasi said. "I want to see my community reflected and teach people who may not know about our community, all while giving us the dignity we deserve. It's not just about representation. It is also about making sure that the representation really has something to say and leaves people with something to think about and learn."



The massive WWII-era gantry crane at Hunters Point Naval Shipyard in San Francisco — seen in 2024 — will be the site of a light-and-sound installation honoring the thousands of Black Americans who came to live and work in the city during the 1940s.

Craig Lee/The Examiner

Also in Hunter's Point, "CRANE" will shine a new light on a wartime artifact. Produced by a team overseen by artist Stacy Carter, the installation will illuminate the historic the gantry crane at the former U.S. Navy shipyard during six live light-and-sound performances in October.

In all, San Francisco's latest public-art initiative stands in stark contrast to recent debacles in the arena. While attempts at removing or updating the context around existing monuments and memorials are a step in the right direction, Shaping Legacy offers bold, entirely new visions developed in a grassroots way, offering a fresh perspective on what future permanent monuments might look like.

"Public art is more than just something beautiful to look at or something that stimulates the economy," Chou said. "It is about really enriching our public spaces, and that means celebrating the diversity of people and cultures that make up The City. When people see themselves celebrated in public spaces, it creates a sense of belonging and pride that supports a city's sense of well-being."

Max Blue is an art critic whose “State of the Arts” column appears monthly in The Examiner.

Select Shaping Legacy Events

Embassy of the Refugee: July 25 at Pioneer Monument, 1 p.m.-4 p.m., artist residency performances on the empty plinth and activations around the monument

Threaded Histories: July 25, 12 p.m.-4 p.m., patch distribution and celebration, Cultura y Arte Nativa de las Americas (CANA)

A Sweet Route: A Tribute to Paleteros: August 2, reinstallation at Potrero del Sol Park and Community Celebration

Shaping Legacy Monument Case Studies, August 5, 6 p.m.-7:30 p.m., panel at SFPL

CRANE: October 9-18, live light and sound performances in Hunter’s Point Shipyard, more details TBA

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