

III. COMMISSION FINDINGS: PRINCIPLES

First and foremost, the Commission recognizes that this project of historical reckoning simultaneously addresses the past and looks toward the future. The Commission’s recommendations aim to promote much-needed public dialogue engaging histories of the many peoples that have occupied, currently occupy, or will eventually occupy the area we know as New York City. Markers and monuments have long been erected as visible images of great achievements by heroic figures, as determined by particular civic groups at specific moments in time, but the inherent gaps are clear. As our nation continues to grapple with a challenging legacy of racism, colonialism, ableism, sexism, prejudice, and inequality, the Commission sees the present as a fertile moment. Now is a time for New York City to take bold action, to identify and contend with racial and other intersectional forms of injustice in its monuments, and to make strides toward truth-telling toward the eventual goal of reconciliation.

Secondly, the Commission recognizes that the City must not only opine on controversial monuments but also be proactive in adding representation of overlooked histories to its collection and its storytelling. The City must create initiatives—in and out of public space—for ongoing, participatory education, inclusive of our collective narratives.

Thirdly, when responding to contested monuments and markers, the Commission recognizes that each phase of evaluation will require in-depth knowledge and expertise to inform potential actions. While there are always limits to historical analysis, we must seek to understand the historical context within which monuments were erected and also be authentic to the ideals of equity and justice that mark our present era. When New Amsterdam and New York were founded, certain groups were included as citizens and others not, and not all citizens had equal civic power to make decisions. As various peoples have migrated into New York City over the decades, their evolving roles in the history, politics, and social fabric of the city have contributed to a more complex and more informed historical understanding.

Lastly, the Commission recognizes that more voices are included in our public dialogue than ever before. Therefore, transparency and public input are essential to the process by which new monuments are added and evaluated, to achieve an equitable public collection.

Through a series of in-depth discussions, the Commission formulated a set of shared values to ground its deliberations. These can be distilled into five guiding principles for the Commission’s recommendations:

- **Reckoning with power to represent history in public**
recognizing that the ability to represent histories in public is powerful; reckoning with inequity and injustice while looking to a just future.
- **Historical understanding**
respect for and commitment to in-depth and nuanced histories, acknowledging multiple perspectives, including histories that previously have not been privileged.
- **Inclusion**
creating conditions for all New Yorkers to feel welcome in New York City's public spaces and to have a voice in the public processes by which monuments and markers are included in such spaces.
- **Complexity**
acknowledging layered and evolving narratives represented in New York City's public spaces, with preference for additive, relational, and intersectional approaches over subtractive ones. Monuments and markers have multiple meanings that are difficult to unravel, and it is often impossible to agree on a single meaning.
- **Justice**
recognizing the erasure embedded in the City's collection of monuments and markers; addressing histories of dispossession, enslavement, and discrimination not adequately represented in the current public landscape; and actualizing equity.

Where these principles are specifically referred to throughout the report, they will be capitalized.

The Commission recognizes that assessment based upon these principles may produce conflicting results for any specific monument, and therefore proposes that an evaluation will have to make a decision as to which principles to prioritize when making recommendations.

III. COMMISSION FINDINGS: REVIEW OF EXISTING WORKS

The following guidelines are rooted in the principles described above and reflect multiple voices, though not necessarily unanimous consensus. Some Commission members advocate for transformation of monument sites through artwork removal and/or large-scale artist-led gestures to remediate what they see as exclusionary narratives. Other Commission members believe that monuments should almost never be removed, seeing their presence as a physical representation of the complex histories of the city. And still others promote the idea that monuments and markers in public spaces offer an opportunity to engage in valuable and complex public dialogues. As a result, the Commission recognizes the improbability of a unanimous opinion on these complex historical artifacts. The Commission hopes that New York City policy will allow for nuanced assessment taking into account the unique and specific history and evolution of each monument. The Commission’s process identified several approaches with which to make evaluations and subsequent recommendations for monuments and markers on City-owned property.

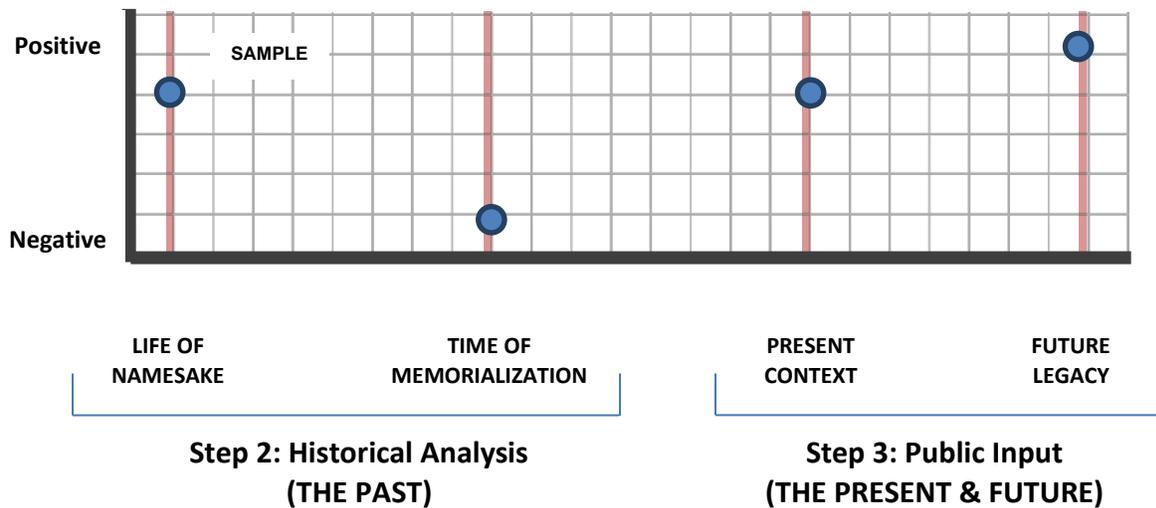
Evaluation Process: Monuments and Public Art

Step 1: WHAT IS REVIEWED?

The Commission recommends that the City consider the following factors to determine when City-owned monuments and artworks on City-owned property may be reviewed:

1. Sustained adverse public reaction (two years or more);
2. Large-scale community opposition (as part of larger cultural/political concerns);
3. Recommendation from the local community board (considerations within the community board’s jurisdiction only);
4. Egregious historical oversight, and/or revelation of new, significant information about the monument and what or whom it represents.

If the City determines that it will initiate the review of a monument, the Commission recommends that the relevant agency with jurisdiction over the work in question (“the Agency”) complete the following steps.



Step 2: THE PAST

The Agency commissions a robust historical analysis, akin to an Environmental Impact Report.

This analysis should be led by a panel of relevant experts, which may include historians and art historians as well as other qualified individuals. The report should include:

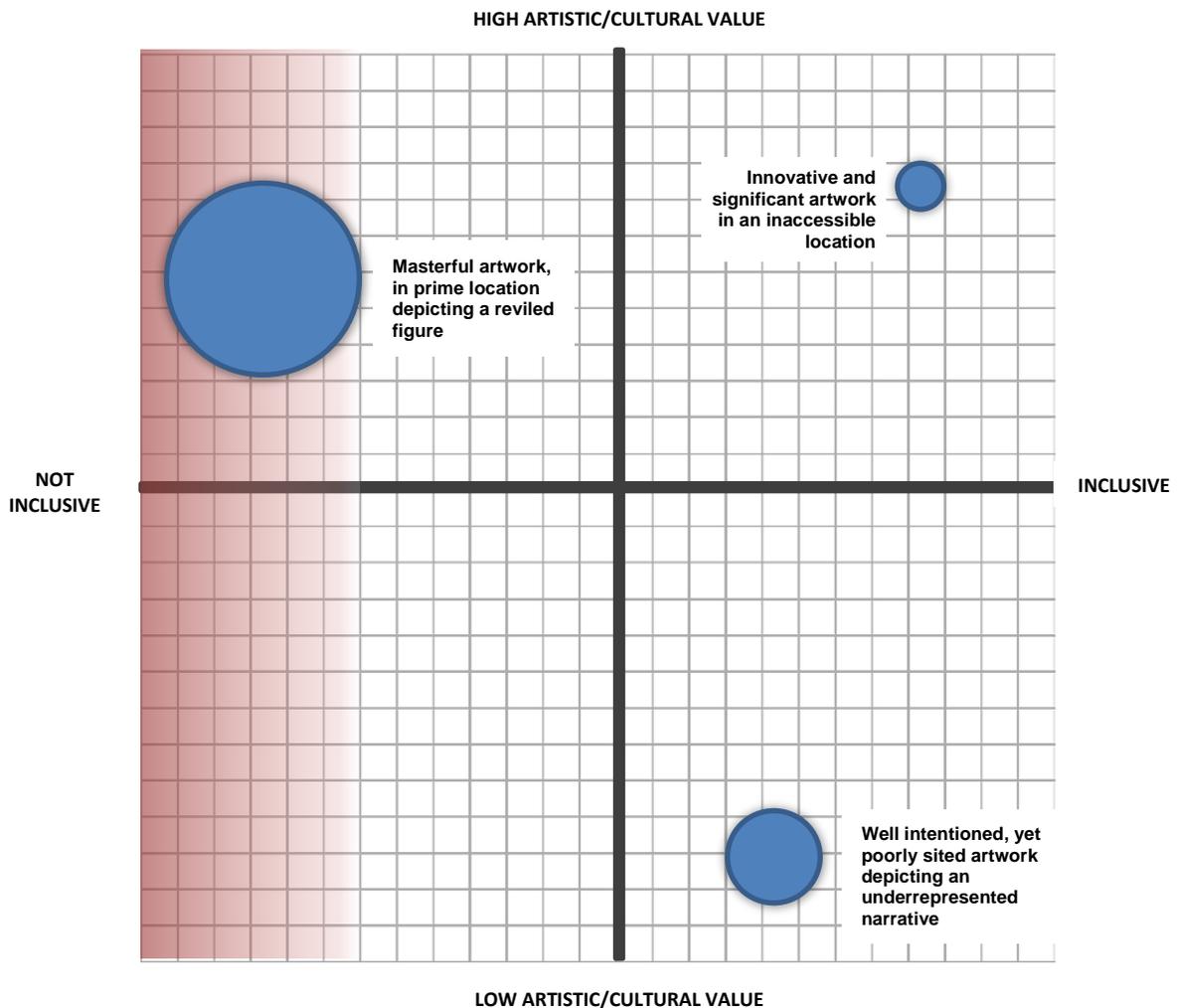
1. Time-based assessment of:
 - a. Era of event or person being memorialized—Inquiry into questions like: Who was the person being commemorated? What did they achieve? How were they perceived during their lifetime?
 - b. Time of memorialization—Inquiry into questions like: What were the circumstances of the commission? Who paid for it? What were the motivations of the commissioning body? Who was the artist and why were they chosen?
2. Assessment of symbolic impact of the monument or its location (including, for instance, considerations of its siting or its historical, cultural, artistic, and/or social value)
3. Assessment of the aesthetic representation, including any historical and political impact and/or considerations of scale
4. An account of counter-arguments and literature review of the memorialized figure and/or event under review
5. Overview of methodology of historical research, with an emphasis on the use of primary sources
6. Cost assessment
7. Legal analysis (ownership, deed restrictions, etc.)

The Commission recommends that the Agency release this report to the public before proceeding to Step 3.

Step 3: THE PRESENT

Public input—where are we now and what do we want our legacy to be?

1. The Agency holds a minimum of one public hearing about the specific work in question, privileging local input.
2. The Agency releases a public survey. Along with a standard questionnaire, a useful device could be the evaluative matrix pictured below. This matrix allows users to consider multiple issues at once—Is the work inclusive? Does it have high artistic value? What is the scale of its impact (as represented by the size of the circle)? This survey should include considerations of time periods, including both the present context and future legacy.



Step 4: THE FUTURE

Release recommendations in a report incorporating previous research and public input.

1. Distill historical analysis and public input.
2. Apply the Commission’s five guiding principles, defined on page 8—Reckoning with power to represent history in public, Historical understanding, Inclusion, Complexity, and Justice—to inform recommendations.

The Commission offers to the City of New York the following considerations for evaluation of controversial monuments in order to deduce recommended action(s) that are embedded in the Commission’s principles:

- A. Recommendations should draw from one or more of the guiding principles offered by the Commission in this document.
- B. The process recommended above exists to ensure a multiplicity of input and expertise in evaluation, and therefore any proposed action(s) should also ensure transparency in process, narrative, and representation. The Commission strives to ensure an evaluation system of checks and balances so that recommendations are thoughtful and consistent across time and City administrations.
- C. All recommendations will aim to address past concerns while concurrently looking toward future narratives.
- D. The primary focus of all action(s) is to [1] engage in complex and additive evolution of the collective public narrative, [2] foster necessary public dialogue about histories in New York City, and [3] reckon with the power embodied in and expressed by City-owned monuments in public space.

Three general recommendations are presented by the Commission to the City of New York for consideration:

1. In cases of public consensus, recommend long-term and/or permanent solutions ranging from simply leaving the monument in place to removal.
2. In cases of polarized debate, recommend short-term and/or temporary intervention at the monument site to encourage participatory, public dialogue, and reevaluate after a period of time.

Based on the above considerations, the City of New York and the overseeing Agency may recommend actions for controversial monuments including, but not limited to:

1. **No action is deemed necessary**—existing monument remains in place without intervention.
2. **Re-contextualization**—provide new or additional context by any means including: install site-specific plaques or signage, update historical information, disclaim endorsement of the acts of historic figures, or provide information electronically.
3. **Relocation**—relocate to another City-owned public site. Alternatives include relocation or long-term loan to cultural organizations, museums, or relevant historical, cultural, or educational settings.
4. **New temporary or permanent works**—commission new artworks in any medium including sculpture, performance, and socially engaged art in order to foster public dialogue on polarizing historical moments and to amplify additional or excluded voices and underrepresented histories.
5. **Removal**—remove offending, controversial, or outdated works from outdoor display on public property.

Step 5: Existing City Process for Reviewing Public Art/Permanent Works

After Steps 1–4 above, the Agency would follow the existing City process for proposals relating to permanent works on City property, including Public Design Commission review and all required community board meetings and/or public hearings.

Evaluation Process: Markers

When evaluating historical markers, first consider the accuracy of the facts regarding the event or figure being acknowledged. If accurate, then consider the nature of the marker if it is perceived to be in opposition to the values of New Yorkers.

Step 1: WHAT IS REVIEWED?

The Commission recommends that the City consider the following factors to determine when City-owned historical markers on City-owned property may be reviewed:

1. Sustained adverse public reaction (two years or more);
2. Instantaneous large-scale community opposition;
3. Egregious historical oversight;
4. Revelation of new, significant information about memorialized figures.

If the City determines that it will initiate the review of a marker, the Commission recommends that the Agency presiding over the work in question complete the following steps.

Step 2: THE PAST & PRESENT

The Agency commissions a robust historical analysis led by a panel of relevant experts, which may include historians and art historians as well as other qualified individuals to assess the historical accuracy of the marker.

Step 3: THE FUTURE

1. If the marker is accurate, it remains in place.
2. If the marker is historically inaccurate, it must be altered to reflect history accurately.
3. Proactively add markers to express additional or excluded voices and underrepresented histories in City public spaces.