

**Landmark:
Participatory Experiences
In Commemorative Places**

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Design

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University of Washington

Abstract

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LAND

PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCES IN
COMMEMORATIVE PLACES

SARAH REITZ

MDES THESIS
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
2017

MARK



What does she remind you?

LANDMARK

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Part I

INTRODUCTION



Abstract

This thesis focuses on visitor engagement at public monuments and memorials. Using the Statue of Liberty replica at Alki Beach in Seattle, Washington as the venue for the case study, this work explores how the visitor experience in commemorative spaces could become hands-on. The research findings provide insights for understanding what drives visitors to participate with interactive outdoor exhibits and activities.

Introduction

I became interested in memorial and monument visitor experience while attending a Society for Experiential Graphic Design (SEGD) Exhibition + Experience Design Workshop in Washington, DC. Among topics of discussion at the event was how to design for contributory forms of visitor participation. Isabella Bruno, an exhibition designer at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York, spoke about the particular challenge of doing this in reflective spaces.¹ She described her work as a balancing act, one that requires asking how to design with “one foot in the past and one in the present.”² As a designer, she explored how to honor the events of 9/11 in her exhibits while still making the visitor experience relevant for the evolving interpretations of 9/11 and the evolving needs of audiences.³ She explained that one of the most under-utilized portions of the museum was its participatory exhibit—a recording space that allows visitors to “respond to questions about how the world and how their lives were changed by the 9/11 attacks.”⁴ For Bruno, the first step in improving the exhibit involved visitor-centered research; an ethnographic approach of shadowing, interviewing, and visitor tracking.⁵ It was a problem she was only in the initial stages of tackling, but other speakers echoed the importance of this research approach in exhibit design. The overall sentiment was that visitor-centered research needs to happen more in within the industry.

I pondered these sentiments against the backdrop of Washington, DC, observing the comings and goings of visitors at various monuments across the National Mall. The interactions I

¹ Isabella Bruno, “The Next Generation of Experience Designers” (panel Discussion, annual Exhibition + Experience Design Workshop of the Society for Experiential Graphic Design, Washington D.C., August 18, 2016).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Reflecting on 9/11,” 9/11 Memorial & Museum, accessed June 20, 2017, www.911memorial.org/reflecting-911-0.

⁵ Bruno.



observed weren't unlike tourist experiences I had growing up in a family of National Park enthusiasts: when you see a monument, you read it and take a family photo! But still I wondered whether these commemorative sites held opportunities for greater participation and exploration. This became the basis for my thesis exploration. My research explores what drives participation with interactive outdoor activates and installations, and specifically, how visitor participation operates in commemorative spaces.

To explore the work problems of participation in memorial spaces, I begin by highlighting some of the challenges visitors might face interpreting and interacting with public monuments. Next, I discuss how participatory exhibition design has been effective in museum settings as means of making museums experiences more engaging, divorcing collections from forced interpretations. Finally, I outline how visitor research in the museum setting may apply to outdoor exhibition as well.

With one foot in the past and one in the present

Shaping our Landscape

Memorials and monuments come in many forms, from grandiose celebrations of war victories to makeshift expressions of individual loss or commemoration. Critical interpretations of monuments note that hegemonic forces often have the advantage of both formally shaping the commemorative space and defining its narrative. Monuments commemorating global events and conflicts are especially susceptible to influence by political forces and aesthetic values that “threaten the formation of political subjectivities.”⁶ Immediately following WWII, Soviet armies erected memorials in conquered European cities—before any were erected in the Soviet Union—to “remind citizens of their ongoing friendship with the USSR.”⁷ By carefully controlling the aesthetic and material choices, the relevant hegemony can not only dictate what and whom to commemorate, but also reinforce its political agendas and hand down societal value statements. Compare, for example, the stark contrast between the National WWII Memorial and the adjacent Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The “stripped down” classicism of the National WWII Memorial—complete with granite pillars, arches and fountain centerpiece—promotes a traditional,

6 Tracey J. Potts, “Dark tourism” and the ‘kitschification’ of 9/11,” *Tourist Studies* 12, no. 3 (2012): 232.

7 Quentin Stevens and Karen A. Franck, *Memorials as Spaces of Engagement: Design, Use and Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 15.

majestic sense of “coherence and order” while the subtler, darker relationship between the wall and the landscape in Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial is moving and somber, physically leading visitors to “descend and rise again to return to the land of the living.”⁸ The design may fail to support an engaging, reflective visitor experience and or leave a lasting impression.

Some scholars argue that monuments—especially those of a political or conflict-based nature—can, at best, “support one claim of legitimacy and power...” and, at worst, “can be used as the scaffolding for a moral framework or an attempt at social control.”⁹ These interpretations highlight the complexity through which visitors can interpret and decode commemorative spaces and the design choices facilitating the viewing experience. Yet while these types of meta-interpretations may be a topic of interest for scholars, they may not necessarily be at the forefront of the average visitor’s experience in the moment.

In addition to the criticism that public monuments and memorials are used for (or have the unintentional effect of) promoting the hegemonic narrative, other scholars argue that heavy-handed iconography or bombastic architectural displays of patriotism in monument design fail to facilitate critical reflection among visitors at the site of the memorial. The kitschification of memorial architecture and the subsequent rise of “memorial tourism,” according to some scholars, results in a blind commemoration of history—an “exit through the gift shop” mentality that fails to facilitate the critical examination of events or foster a holistic understanding of historical context.¹⁰ Social norms influence visitor behavior in commemorative spaces. The 9/11 Memorial, for instance, regulates the behavior of its visitors, permitting “no recreation, no loud noise, no ‘behaving in a way that is inappropriate.’”¹¹ The highly regulated and commercial nature of

8 Paul Goldberger, “Down At the Mall: The new World War II memorial doesn’t rise to the occasion,” *New Yorker*, May 31, 2004, accessed June 20, 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/31/down-at-the-mall>.

9 Dacia Viejo-Rose, “Memorial functions: Intent, impact and the right to remember,” *Memory Studies* 4, no. 4 (2011): 469.

10 Potts, 232.

11 Michael Kimmelman, “Finding Space for the Living at a Memorial,” *New York Times*, May 28, 2014, accessed June 20, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2014/05/29/arts/design/finding-space-for-the-living-at-a-memorial.html#.

the site was a focal point of criticism in the months following the site opening, New York Times Architecture critic Michael Kimmelman aptly noting, “At a site celebrating freedom and liberty, protests and demonstrations are prohibited.”¹²

The visitor experience of commemorative spaces may also be influenced by how our interpretation on history evolves. As time passes and societal attitudes change, so does the lens through which we interpret the meaning a commemorative space. Such spaces are subject to societal norms that can instill a “new significance [for the memorial] as time passes.”¹³

In some instances, these value shifts can even result in the physical alteration of a commemorative site. Some alterations are permanent, such as formal sculptural additions referred to as “dialogic memorials”—sister monuments erected on-site to recontextualize the meaning of an existing monument.¹⁴ For instance, in Georgetown, Texas, city leadership opted to erect a monument of a civil rights leader adjacent to a confederate monument in the city’s town square, rather than remove the confederate monument.¹⁵

Others alterations are ephemeral and take the form of an ad hoc, pop-up protest or act of memorial. Following the November 2016 election, Susan B. Anthony’s gravesite grew as a spontaneous memorial, where visitors filled the headstone with “I Voted” stickers after casting their ballots.¹⁶ Makeshift memorials or pop-up tributes at the site of existing monuments typically grow in response to a particular event—commemorating a holiday or event, or mourning a tragedy. The material leftover from such ad hoc installations are usually removed or discarded after a period by monument or park

¹² Ibid

¹³ Debra Marshall, “Making sense of remembrance,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 5, no. 1 (2004).

¹⁴ Stevens and Franck, 206.

¹⁵ Wade Goodwyn, “Texas Town ‘Balances’ Confederate Statue With One Of Lawyer Who Fought KKK,” NPR, June 5, 2017, accessed June 20, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/06/05/531536384/texas-town-finds-unique-way-to-deal-with-confederate-statue-controversies>.

¹⁶ Cleve Wootson, “Susan B. Anthony’s tombstone covered in ‘I Voted’ stickers,” *Washington Post*, November 8, 2016, accessed June 20, 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2016/live-updates/general-election/real-time-updates-on-the-2016-election-voting-and-race-results/susan-b-anthonys-tombstone-covered-in-i-voted-stickers/?utm_term=.707d08c74aee.

management. The National Parks Service, for example, removes and catalogues non-perishable mementos left behind at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.¹⁷ Yet not all memorials easily facilitate inventive or creative acts of reflection, and opportunities for makeshift expression can be limited at formal memorials where commemorative acts are intended to be “traditional and predictable.”¹⁸

The way we engage with and interpret commemorative spaces is complex, as is the task of designing opportunities for visitor participation on-site. Memorials and monuments can sometimes fail to afford reflective or relevant experiences for visitors. Further, while social values are fluid, the brick-and-mortar permanence of certain kinds of commemorative spaces is not. How then should these spaces account for evolving social needs, or the desire of visitors to respond to the implied messaging behind a monument? In tackling this visitor experience question, contemporary museums serve as a useful analogue. Like monuments, contemporary museums must grapple with artifacts, their stories, and visitor engagement; having one foot in the past and one in the present.

Temple vs. Forum

While the role of traditional museums of the 19th century was to care for, preserve, and display objects in order to promote “the transmission of values from one generation to the next,”¹⁹ the modern day practice of museum management is quite different. Today, visitors are more likely to question information as it is presented to them, and they often expect opportunities to exchange ideas.²⁰ These participatory exhibit design practices—largely informed by visitor experience research—can

¹⁷ “Frequently Asked Questions,” National Park Service, last modified April 10, 2015, accessed June 20, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/vive/faqs.htm>.

¹⁸ Stevens and Franck, 109.

¹⁹ Hilde S. Hein, “The Authority of Objects: From Regime Change to Paradigm Shift,” *Curator* 50, no. 1 (January 2007): 78.

²⁰ Kenneth Hudson, “The Museum as a Public Forum,” *Museum International* 49, no. 1 (1997): 59.

serve as a model for more robust place-making and for facilitating new forms of interaction at commemorative sites.

Traditional museums maintained their duty was to reinforce cultural norms via the preservation and protection of significant cultural icons, but museum practitioners today acknowledge that the preservation model excludes non-traditional perspectives and allows mainstream power structures to control the institution's narrative.²¹ Museum studies increasingly question the merits of the museum as a temple—an institution that bases its narrative on the well-organized display of venerated collections—versus the idea of the museum as a forum—a democratic institution that facilitates discussion, debate, and free-form interpretation by visitors.²² Exhibit design has evolved to include more hands-on, “minds-on” experiences that allow visitors to physically interact with objects while also exploring the various meanings afforded to an object.²³ In exhibition design, this means success must be judged not on the presentation of the show's content but on how the experience responds to the needs of visitors.²⁴ In addition to information about collections supplied by subject experts, museums are increasingly relying on visitor surveys, interviews and observations to inform the design of exhibits and understand what drives participation.

Research has shown that present-day audiences have different expectations regarding behavior and interaction in museums. The rise of social media and advances in mobile technology leave visitors feeling more connected to the museum viewing experience than ever before.²⁵ Visitors today expect to be able to comment on collections and share their experiences and views. With increased accessibility, they are able to generate intercultural conversations within a museum setting and beyond.²⁶ Nina Simon's work regarding

21 Barry Lord, ed., *The Manual of Museum Learning* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2007), 108.

22 Victoria Cain, “Exhibitionary Complexity: Reconsidering Museums' Cultural Authority,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (Dec. 2008): 1147.

23 Lord, 80.

24 James Volkert, “Monologue to Dialogue,” *Museum News* 70, no. 2 (1991): 48.

25 Petronela Spiridon and Ion Sandu, “Museums in the Life of the Public,” *International Journal of Conservation Science* 7, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 91.

26 Spiridon and Sandu, 87.

participatory visitor experiences in exhibit design indicates that interaction (technology-based or otherwise) is an increasingly valued component of a museum-going experience:

“There will always be visitors who enjoy static exhibitions conferring authoritative knowledge. There will always be visitors who enjoy interactive programs that allow them to test that knowledge for themselves. And there will increasingly be visitors—perhaps new ones—who enjoy the opportunity to add their own voices to ongoing discussions about the knowledge presented.”²⁷

Here, Simon illustrates that the new paradigm for museum learning should include participation that asks visitor to do more than passively read or turn knobs to access content. For Simon, some forms of engagement allow visitors to be content creators. She identifies a contributory model for exhibit design where “visitors are solicited to provide limited and specified objects, actions, or ideas to an institutionally controlled process.”²⁸ Examples of this type of interaction include the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where visitors exit the permanent collection through an installation about present-day human rights atrocities and genocide. In an August 2016 visit, the exhibit featured a participatory installation that asked visitors to share a reflection on an index card answering what actions they would take to prevent genocide in the future. Simon advocates for participatory visitor experiences that yield a positive cognitive effect, meaning an interaction that stimulates visitors to form new, personally relevant conclusions regarding the subject at hand.²⁹ The ability to connect with a subject on a personal level, according to Simon, is what drives visitors to interact, and “participatory elements may draw in audiences for whom creative activities and social connection are preconditions for cultural engagement.”³⁰

27 Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), Chapter 5.

28 Ibid.

29 Nina Simon, *The Art of Relevance* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2016), 32.

30 Simon, Chapter 5.

Nina Simon:

“And there will increasingly be visitors—perhaps new ones—who enjoy the opportunity to add their own voices to ongoing discussions about the knowledge presented.”

Designing Participatory Experiences

In a museum setting, participatory exhibition design increasingly looks to visitor study research. Though it takes place in an indoor setting, the research model adopted by museums for visitor segmentation provides a helpful model for how to research the visitor experience at monuments.

In order to encourage visitors to contribute thoughts, opinions, or information, museum professionals must understand how to parse those various audience needs to create a diverse swath of relevant experiences. Museum studies scholars have noted that visitors' expectations are situational, rooted in various individual identity-related factors. John Falk's visitor study research theorizes that a visitor's willingness to engage in an exhibit can be predicted by understanding audience segmentation.³¹ Knowing audience types allows designers and museum professionals to predict how visitors might engage with a particular activity. (i.e. Is the goal of this exhibit experience to encourage parents to facilitate a learning experience with their children? Is the interaction supposed to be contemplative in some way? How can we support the ability to ask and answer in an exhibit?) According to Falk, adopting a visitor-centric research approach to design—one that leverages surveys, interview, and visitor tracking to understand the unique needs of the museum-going public—can help improve overall outcomes for both visitors and institutions by better aligning audience expectations with the experiences provided.³² This process should be applicable in other exhibition design settings.

Museums have shifted from being object-driven institutions with a “top-down” approach to being visitor-responsive environments with “bottom-up” programming.³³ Today, “visitors expect the ability to respond and to be taken seriously... [and] to discuss, share, and

³¹ John Falk, “Museum audiences: A visitor-centered perspective,” *Society and Leisure* 39, no. 3 (2016): 360.

³² *Ibid.*, 368.

³³ Peter H. Welsh, “Grasping Museums: Three New Museum Studies Anthologies,” *Museum Anthropology* 28, no. 1 (March 2005): 68.

remix what they consume.”³⁴ Participatory, contribution-based visitor experiences allow people to create in an informed yet open environment, ultimately supporting dialog within the exhibit setting. This is the democratic nature of the “museum as forum” concept. Understanding visitor motivation is essential to the success of this participation-driven, collaborative model of interaction.

Conclusion

Scholars have noted the parallels between engagement that occurs in museums and with outdoor interactive art. *In Creative Rebellion for the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Public and Interactive Art to Political Life in America*, Diana Boros takes the position that public interactive art is an essential component for a robust, engaged democracy.³⁵ She draws parallels between her main thesis and Carol Duncan’s visitor study research that claims museum visitors engage in a “ritualistic” act of exploration that ultimately leads to transformative experiences.³⁶ Just as Duncan touts the democratic capabilities of the museum, Boros claims public art—particularly when it is participatory—“is the primary vehicle for democratically encouraging inner reflection.”³⁷ According to Boros, “public art encourages ritualistic experiences not just in the museum, but on the way to work, or to school, as well.”³⁸ Audiences are increasingly seeking new ways to engage, interact with, and interpret commemorative sites:

34 Merete Sanderhoff, “Open Images: Risk or opportunity for art collections in the digital age?,” *Nordisk Museologi* 2013, no. 2 (2013): 132 (quoting Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), ii).

35 Jen Delos Reyes, “Creative Rebellion for the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Public and Interactive Art to Political Life in America,” *Public Art Dialogue* 4, no. 2 (Oct. 1, 2014): 266.

36 Diana Boros, *Creative Rebellion for the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Public and Interactive Art to Political Life in America* (New York: palgrave macmillan, 2012), 78.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

*“While memorials and public space generally offer possible platforms for commemoration, the public is inventive, increasingly eager and sometimes brave in making creative use of the possibilities they discover, as they often are in other appropriations of public space.”*³⁹

In a museum setting, we know that visitors have unique needs that influence how they participate.⁴⁰ What then might motivate a visitor to participate in a collaborative or reflective activity in an outdoor, public environment?

This thesis touches on several realms, exploring subjects of memorial design, exhibition design, participatory experiences, and place-making. However, the primary focus is visitor experience: I seek to answer how designers can engage in a visitor-centered research process to understand what drives participation with interactive public installations.

39 Stevens and Franck, 109.

40 Falk, 358.



Part II

EXPLORATION

Selecting a Site

After documenting the memorials and monuments in the Seattle area, I ultimately chose Seattle's Statue of Liberty Replica at Alki Beach Park as the case study for my research. Many factors influenced this decision, including the statue's interesting history, the opportunities for scaling the project, and the general rise of Statue of Liberty-related imagery in national and political discourse. Particularly though, I was interested in the dual symbolic nature that I observed in the site. On one side, the replica represents the same ideas associated with the original Statue of Liberty—those of freedom, immigration, openness, and the promise of opportunity. On the other side, this particular replica's origins link it inextricably to Cold War era society and notions of patriotism at that time.

The replica was erected in 1952 by Seattle-area Sea Scouts and Boy Scouts of America (BSA) as part of the BSA's larger "Strengthening the Arm of Liberty" crusade.⁴¹ Participating troops across the country engaged in fundraising efforts to erect small Statue of Liberty replicas in their respective communities. Although little formal documentation of the project exists, an October 2007 issue of Scouting Magazine noted that the project's founders initiated the crusade "because of the darkening world situation" and to promote "freedom" over "despotism."⁴² Seattle's replica is part of a network of nearly 200 replicas.

In addition to the site's compelling history, I found the Alki Beach replica to be an intriguing case study because of the re-emergence of the original Statue of Liberty "as a potent and resonant symbol amid a polarizing debate about immigration policy."⁴³ I wondered how audiences might interpret and interact with the Seattle replica given that it was an election year, and given the recent appropriations of Lady Liberty's likeness through social media, Internet memes, protest signs, and political cartoons.

⁴¹ Marti Attoun, "Little Sisters of Liberty," Scouting Magazine, October 2007, accessed June 20, 2017, <https://scoutingmagazine.org/issues/0710/index.html>.

⁴² Marti Attoun, "Little Sisters of Liberty," Scouting Magazine, October 2007, accessed June 20, 2017, <https://scoutingmagazine.org/issues/0710/index.html>.

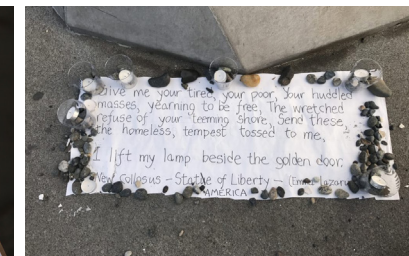
⁴³ Eli Rosenberg, "Brand New Colossus: A Statue of Liberty Revival Amid Immigration Woes," New York Times, March 30, 2017, accessed June 20, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/03/30/nyregion/statue-of-liberty-immigration-debate-tourism-.html.

noticed
 "I forgot what it's supposed to represent..."
 sign → "love this"
 "Feel like it's Kind of random"
 "It's a LANDMARK"
 "Reminds me of New York."
 "might have felt differently about this two years ago."
 "that this happened"

On-site Interviews

I began my research by conducting a series of on-site interviews and observations to make a baseline assessment of how visitors engage with the site. It was important that I understand the general makeup of Alki Beach visitors, their motivations for coming to the park, activities they engaged in while there, and most important, their general impressions of the statue. How specifically did they interact with it? What, if anything, about their viewing experiences were meaningful?

I conducted these interviews and observations over several days in January 2017, during which I spoke to approximately 35 people in a series of 15 different interviews. This phase of the research overlapped a particularly volatile period of national political discourse. A newly sworn-in President Trump had just signed his first executive order barring immigration from predominantly Muslim nations, an act that sparked nation-wide protests. This is important to note because of the way it affected my interviews. For example, a large hand-written sign containing an excerpt from Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" (the poem inscribed at the base of the original Statue of Liberty) was placed at the base of the replica, presumably in response to the executive order. This sign—interpreted by many visitors as an act of protest—became a focal point of many of our discussions.



“Did I mention this view?”

Audience Motivations

The park attracted a diverse group of visitors who were united by a desire to enjoy (relatively) nice Seattle weather or engage in a recreational activity of some sort.

Although the beach portion of Alki Beach Park is suited for leisure activities like grilling or lounging, the Statue of Liberty replica rests on a thin promenade that funnels visitors along a seaside path. Many of those who pass the statue do so as part of their daily run, walk with a dog, or casual stroll. Ultimately, this makes the site a very active place. Not surprisingly, good weather and scenery seemed to be a significant motivating factor drawing visitors to the park:

- *“We came to get out and enjoy the weather.”*
- *“I come here for the view. Especially with the snow on the mountains.”*
- *“I’m from Hawaii originally. I love getting to spend time by the ocean. Did I mention this view?”*

Some visitors were tourists, touring the park because they found the beach on lists of top attractions in the city. Others were immediate locals who lived nearby and came to the park daily. Others were Seattle natives who didn’t live in the immediate vicinity, but had traveled to the park for the afternoon.

Most who stopped to observe the statue did so in groups. However, this may be more related to how people visit parks, not how people visit monuments. The poem at the base also seemed to instigate discussion and draw visitors in closer to the statue. Solo visitors stopped to read the hand-written poem, but did not linger to the extent groups did.

Families tended to use the statue—as well as the handwritten poem at the base—as an opportunity to facilitate discussion with their children. They would ask what the children knew about the Statue of Liberty or prompt them to read out loud from the plaque or hand-written poem. When interviewed, parents generally expressed positive feelings about the statue. Referring to the poem below the statue, one parent responded,

“I like for my kids to see it.”

Parents seem less curious about the statue and more curious about how their children interpreted its meaning. One mother deflected my questions to her son, asking, “What do you think? What does the statue mean?” After he answered that he knew the original had been a gift from France, she summarized, “Oh, so it’s a message of friendship.”



Alki Beach, 9/11

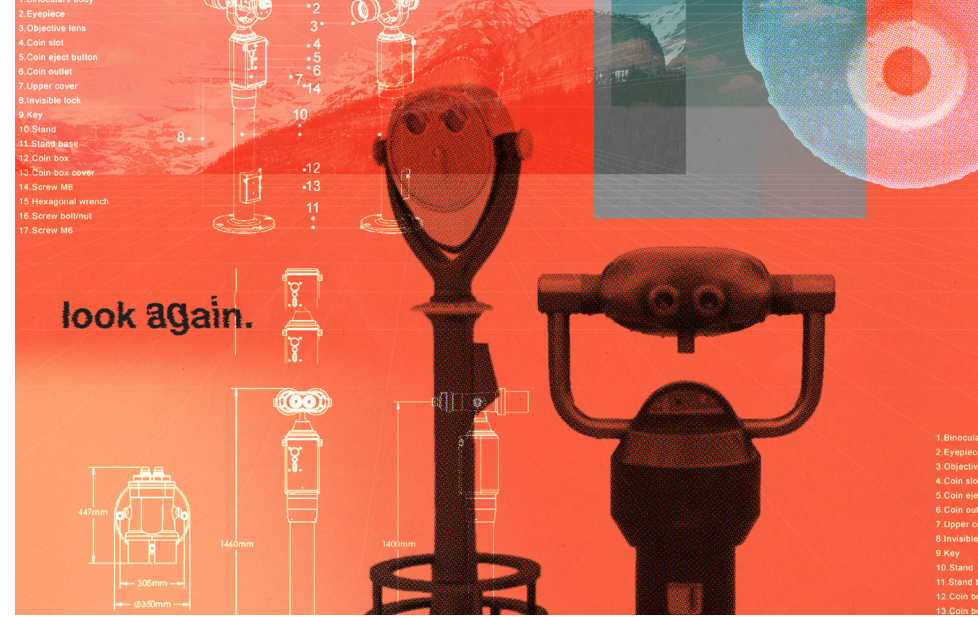
Impressions of Statue

Immediate locals who have lived in the area for decades tended to express emotional connections with the statue and plaza. They remember the plaza's renovation from several years earlier and recalled how the statue grew as a spontaneous memorial and focal point of community mourning following the events of 9/11.

In contrast, infrequent visitors—perhaps those who lived further away—viewed the statue a degree of skepticism. These visitors were typically younger people in their 20s or 30s. They approached the statue as one might approach a quirky roadside attraction, with an air of incredulity, curiosity, and boisterousness. Some described the statue laughable and odd—a hokey symbol of Americana. “Merica!” laughed one visitor. “It’s kind of just a thing. It’s not evocative of anything. This poem [referencing the pop-up protest] is way more meaningful than this [statue].”

Several admitted that the statue was only meaningful to them in light of these recent events, suggesting if the political climate were different, the statue would not be as interesting or meaningful. Some visitors described a somber interpretation of the statue, specifically citing recent executive orders by the Trump administration regarding undocumented immigrants and refugees:

- *“I wouldn’t have associated anything significant with [this statue] until eight days ago. Now I think about the Muslim ban, and I see this statue as a nice symbol of what America is about. I didn’t get it before. But now it’s relevant.”*



Concept Development

Some visitors viewed the statue as an important symbol of national unity. Others saw it as a hokey icon, only meaningful in the light of recent political events and protests. Yet both groups seemed to agree that the statue became more relevant when activated by temporary additions, from the makeshift memorials constructed following 9/11, to the protest poem that rested at the base in January. It seemed as though there was community value placed on the idea of expression or protest at the site. Because I knew that visitors came to the park to engage in recreational activities, I realized that any installation would need to be playful or active in some way. While I wanted visitors to be able to engage in a creative, expressive, activity, I also wanted it to be reflective.

I began concepting with this in mind, brainstorming ideas for installations that called for some form of visitor contribution. Could the installation solicit visitors to leave audio recordings, written feedback, drawings in reaction to a Statue of Liberty themed prompt? What would the form look like? How would visitors understand that the outdoor exhibition was one they could engage with? Finally and most importantly, if I asked people to engage in a participatory activity, would they? I quickly realized that I was making design assumptions that could easily be tested in low-fidelity way. This led to the prototyping phase of my research.



Research Questions

1 → What interactions and material design would work best on-site? 2 → What types of responses could I expect? 3 → What prompts would visitors react to?

*Research Plan***Prototyping Goals**

Prototyping allowed me to explore what modes of interaction would create an engaging visitor experience and promote critical reflection at the site.

Metrics

To gauge the success of each probe, I outlined success metrics by which to assess visitor input. I hoped participatory contributions would be 1) Reflective and personal in nature, 2) Unique and original, and 3) didactic in nature and conceived as a response to the visitors unique perceptions of the statue's symbolism.

Methods of Evaluation

Visitor observations

Interviews

Analysis of visitors' material contributions

PROTOTYPE 1

Activity

Pen and paper drawings

Overview

I was curious to see to what extent the context of the space would act as its own prompt for visitors to participate in the activity. The prompt for the first prototype was left intentionally open and selected a very expressive activity (drawing) to gauge whether visitors would take the time to participate.

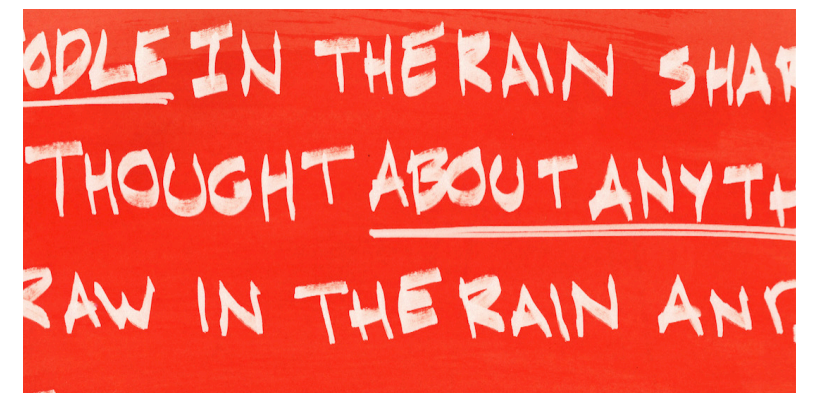
Prompt

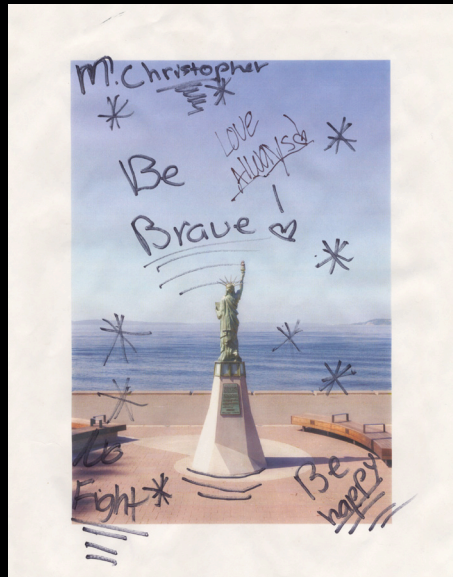
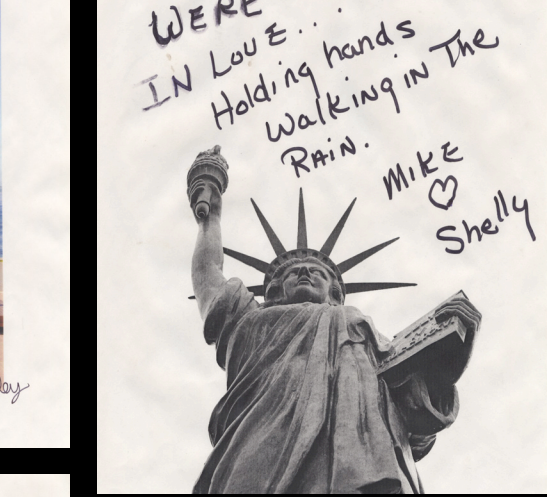
Draw in the Rain!

Setup

I installed a drawing station complete with clipboards, pens, a small writing table, chairs and images of the Statue of Liberty (printed on waterproof paper) at the Statue of Liberty Plaza. Example responses were displayed on the ground around the installation, weighed down with stones—an indication to visitors that drawings should be left behind at the statue’s base. Signs prompting visitors to “Draw in the Rain!” (making the best of Seattle winter)) were placed at the writing station.

P1 OBSERVATIONS →





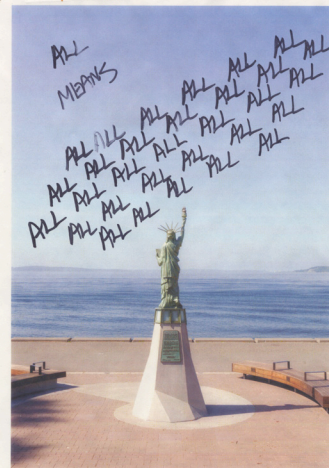
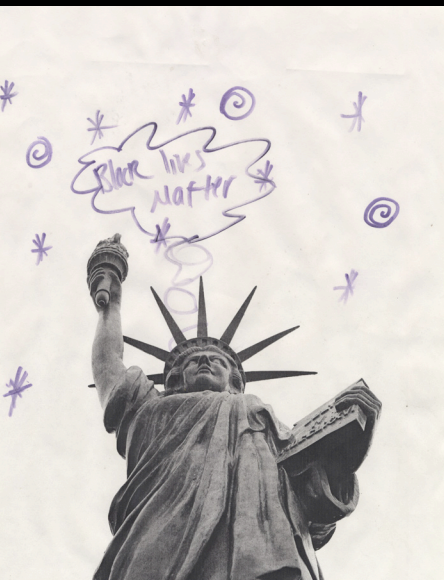
P1 OBSERVATIONS

High Level of Participation

The installation garnered a high level of participation, with visitors contributing twenty-seven responses over a span of two hours. The activity was popular with children and families. Adults who participated were usually part of a group (a couple or group of friends), whereas solo park visitors were more likely to stop and view responses but not engage in the activity.

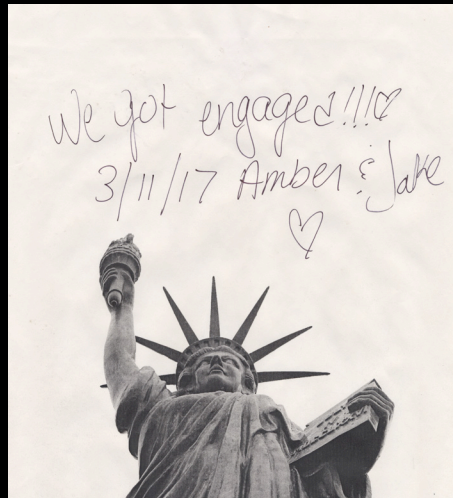
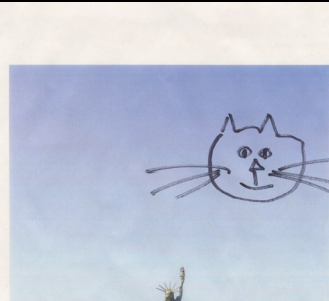
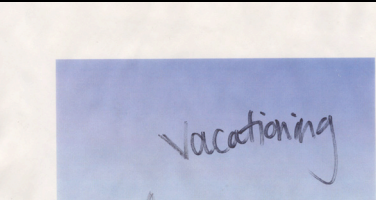
The Intimidation of Creativity

The example drawings were extremely helpful to encourage participation. Visitors stopped to look at the examples first, then contributed drawings of their own, making the collection gradually grow in scale. Seeing others participate seemed to make people feel comfortable engaging in the task. Though visitors participated, they tended to draw in secluded areas or only after strangers had vacated the plaza, an indication that engaging in a creative activity (drawing) might feel somewhat intimidating in a public setting. I decided to try a more subdued activity for the subsequent prototype.



Indiscernible Responses

Some visitors contributed politically or socially motivated responses, leaving behind messages about gay rights, racism, nation unity, or patriotism. Other visitors left behind personal drawings and reflections about love or friendship. However, many other responses were indiscernible, seemingly unrelated to the statue and any symbolic interpretation. Many were children's drawings. While they may have been honest reflections, their obscure nature made them uninteresting. This indicated the need to test that a more symbolically driven, controlled prompt.



PROTOTYPE 2

Activity

Community message board

Overview

Because the previous prototype asked visitors engage in a creative, expressive, activity, I decided to test an activity that was much more restrained—limited both by a prompt and in the method/range of responses. I chose the letter board because of its controlled look and feel, but also because I hoped visitors would be drawn to its tactile nature.

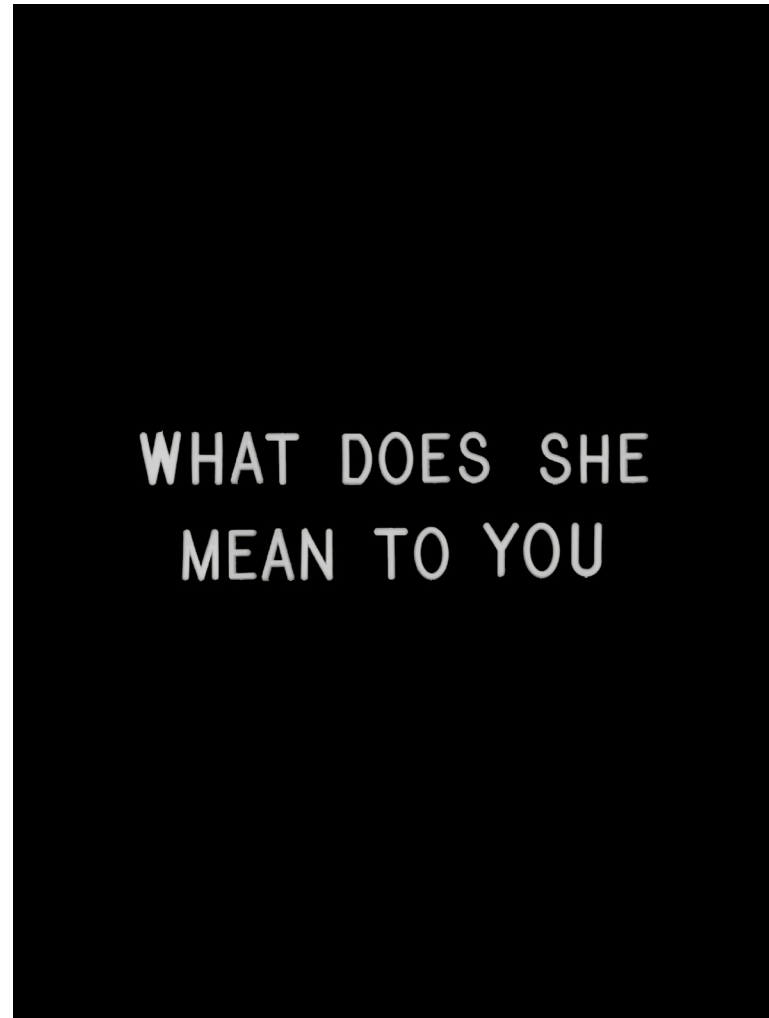
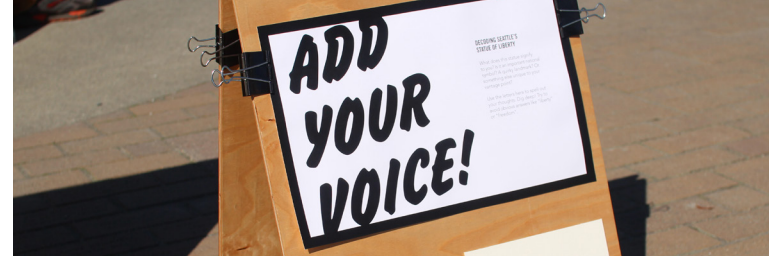
Prompt

What does she mean to you?

Setup

A letter board was placed at the base of the statue with signage prompting visitors to “add their voice” by filling in the letter board. A container with letters rested at the base of the signage.

P2 OBSERVATIONS →



LIGHT FUN
SANCTUARY
ACCEPTANCE
BRAVE TRUTH
THANK YOU

P2 OBSERVATIONS

A Useful Prompt, but Overly Complex Activity

Using a prompt with this prototype seemed to lead to more symbolic, didactic reactions and contributions. However, the responses were not particularly unique or revealing.

Lack of Participation

The activity seemed to take too much time and asked too much of visitors for them to create detailed responses on the board. Visibly, the installation was unimpressive, low to the ground, and easy not to notice. The sandwich board may have appeared to be advertising rather than an activity. Overall, the activity lacked a strong affordance welcoming participation.

A Tactile Group Activity

Though few participated, those who did seemed to enjoy the tactile nature of the installation. As with the first prototype, the activity attracted families with children who used the letter board as a conversation starter and spelling game. Couples helped each other sort through the letter tin and some visitors took photos next to their responses. Generally, those who participated did so in a group of some kind.

PROTOTYPE 3**Activity**

Sidewalk chalk drawings

Overview

The (informative!) failures of the letter board prototype indicated that the more complex the activity, the less likely visitors would be to participate with it. Street chalk is a familiar material that wouldn't require much setup, maintenance, or instruction. Hoping it would yield more unique and personally reflective responses than the previous test, I decided to use an explicitly personal prompt with this prototype.

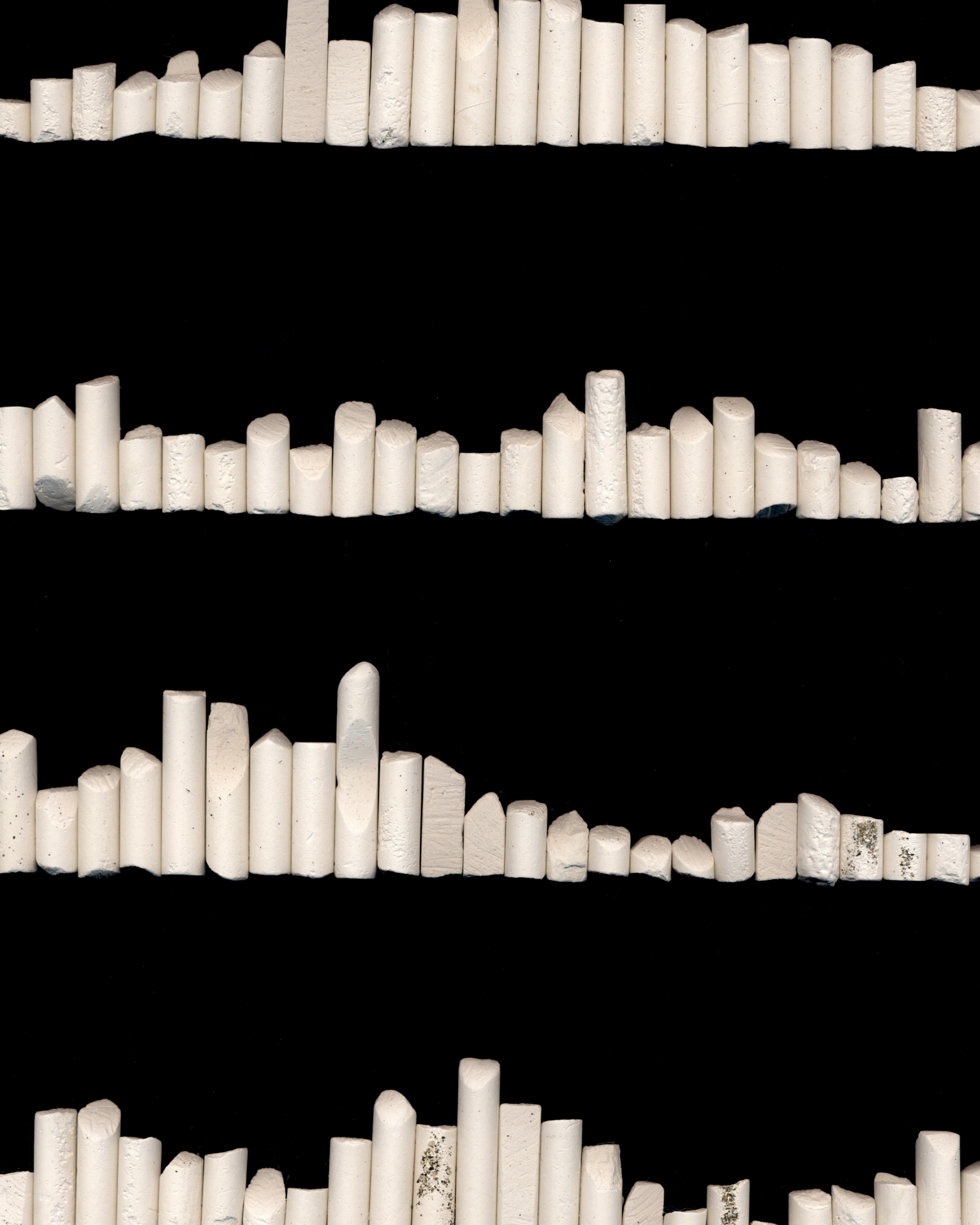
Prompt

Dedicate a brick to an idea or person who embodies her spirit.

Setup

The prompt was written in chalk near the base of the statue and tins of white chalk were placed around the base. Several example bricks were filled in to indicate how to do the activity.





P3 OBSERVATIONS**High level of participation**

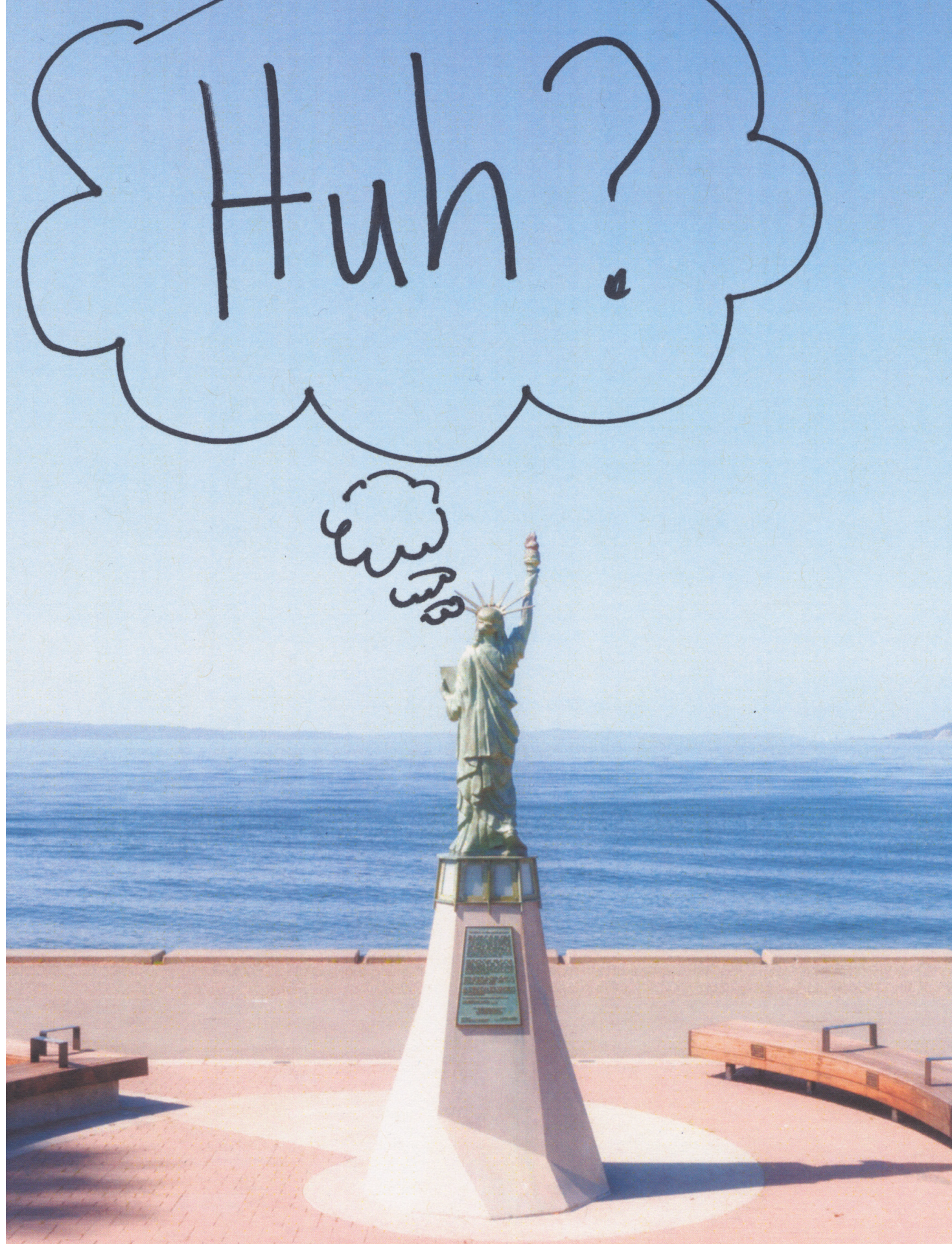
Over the course of three hours, visitors responded by filling the plaza with personal dedications, politically and socially motivated messages, drawings, and scratches. The strong affordance of the chalk made visitors easily able to understand and engage with the activity. The large scale of the installations and sheer number of responses also gave visitors breathing room to engage in a creative, expressive activity with a certain degree of privacy.

Not visually controlled

As the plaza filled, the original hand-written prompt became lost among other visitor responses. The environment grew in an uncontrolled way, with no direction or way for visitors to understand the context of the activity. Over time as responses accumulated, the area looked somewhat vandalized. The aesthetic would need to be more tightly controlled for future installations.

Accessibility

This activity excluded visitors with accessibility or mobility issues. One visitor, unable to kneel low to the ground, asked if I would fill in a brick for her. A future installation would need to account for visitors' various mobility levels.



Analysis

I began my research process by defining what successful participation would look like, judging success based on how reflective, unique and symbolically significant the responses were. This was a useful way to develop my prototypes, but in the end, observations of visitor behavior also informed my findings. Engaging in a visitor-centered research process meant observing the subtleties of human interaction during the moments of participation. It meant watching visitor movements, noticing when visitors were confused, empathizing with their needs and observing the environment. The findings from this research, outlined here, were specific to the interactions I observed while prototyping with my success metrics in mind. Although the research focused on visitor engagement at a public monument, the findings provide insights into general human behavior patterns that could be applied to other forms of interactive public art or exhibit design.

Participation is a social activity.

A consistent finding throughout the research process was that visitors were much more likely to contribute a reflection, thought, or drawing if they were in a group. Families regularly interacted with the prototypes in order to facilitate discussions and learning opportunities with children. Friends used the installations as conversation starters, photographing their interactions with each other and the responses they contributed to the activity. Companions helped each other develop creative answers to the prompts, laughed at their solutions, and speculated about the responses of visitors before them. In a park where people visit with the intent of socializing or playing, some welcomed the opportunity to engage in civic- or community-minded conversation, such as the meaning of the Statue of Liberty.

Creativity is intimidating.

Creative professionals aren't the only ones who experience fear of the blank canvas. Generating thoughtful, original responses, drawings, or comments can be an intimidating experience for all participants, especially if those responses are in public display. Designers can employ a number of tactics to ease this intimidation.

Create spaces for privacy in public.

People need space to be creative. The chalk and drawing activities both occupied enough space on the plaza that multiple people could engage in the activity at once without feeling crowded. Visitors tended to feel more comfortable developing and contributing responses if they knew they weren't being watched or judged. Designing activities with an impressive physical scale can help ease feelings of social awkwardness by providing a degree of privacy and breathing room to be generative.

Lead by example.

Visitors felt more comfortable contributing responses after seeing that others had already participated in the activity. Seeding the installations with responses from the onset demonstrated how to engage with the activity. As contributions accumulated, they helped communicate the various possibilities for responding. Examples also helped demonstrate the social value of contribution. Seeing someone else's compelling drawing or responses demonstrated that others found the activity worthy of participation.

Ask relevant questions

Asking a compelling question helps people generate unique responses. Prompts that asked obvious questions ("What does she mean to you?") yielded responses that may have been personally relevant for the contributors, but weren't necessarily compelling for others to read. This can affect willingness to participate: If the

discussion isn't interesting, why contribute to it? Successful prompts allowed people to communicate personal messages that were still succinctly tied to a larger narrative—in this case, symbolic narrative of the Statue of Liberty replica. Asking a strong question gives context to the activity and allows viewers to see the value in participating.

Design to delight.

Parks are inherently active, playful spaces. Complicated activities, like the message board, weren't intuitive, slowed visitors down, and created too much work to be approachable and engaging. Leisurely visitors are open to exploration and participation, but only if that participation enhances their personal and social experience at the park. If the activity isn't physically, creatively, or socially fulfilling, people will overlook it.

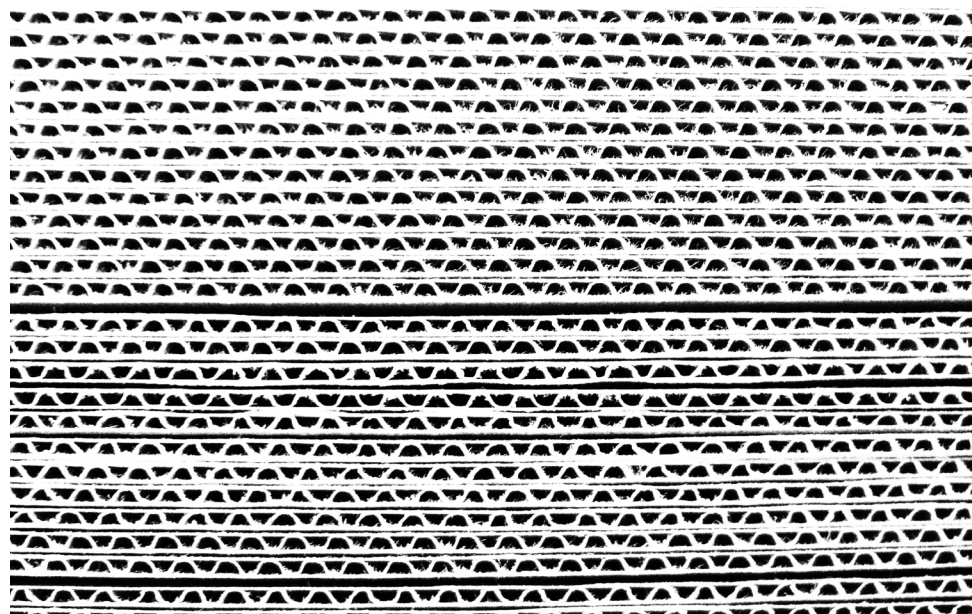
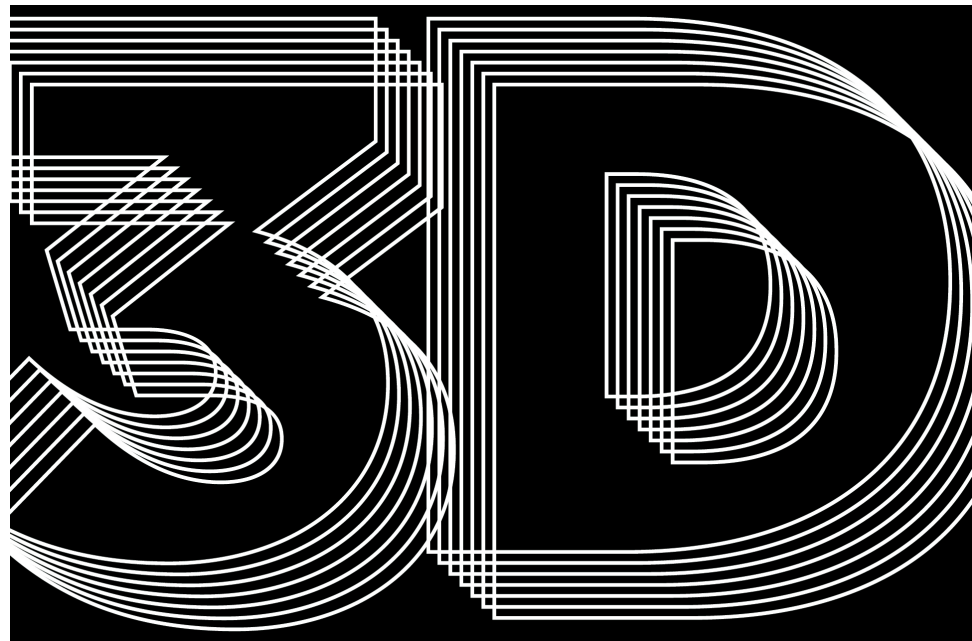
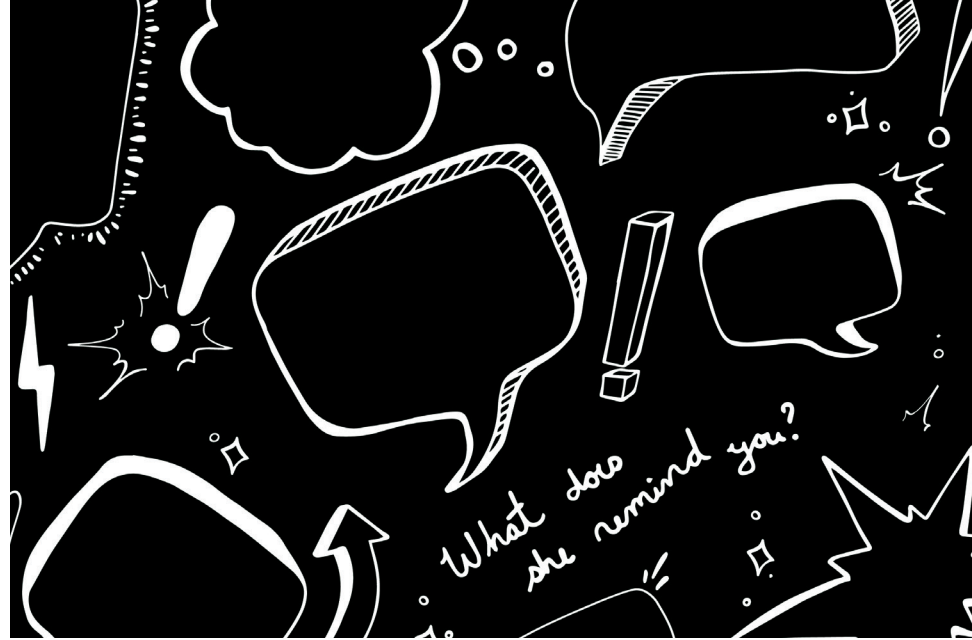
Be accessible.

Activities too low to the ground excluded visitors with mobility issues. All of the prototypes, in fact, prompted visitors to bend over or kneel in order to contribute their responses. As a result, the prototypes catered most to children, making older participants less interested in engaging. Designing at an accessible, inclusive scale accounts for and allows for more diverse adult participation.



Part IV

DESIGN



Design Decisions

Drawing + Writing Activity

I liked the expressive and illustrative nature of the responses from the first prototype. The chalk activity afforded similar expression, but drawing across the plaza's brick foundation and grout was difficult. I also knew a chalk activity that asked visitors to draw on the sidewalk wasn't accessible to visitors with mobility issues. I decided to design an activity that used markers and paint pens as the input mechanism.

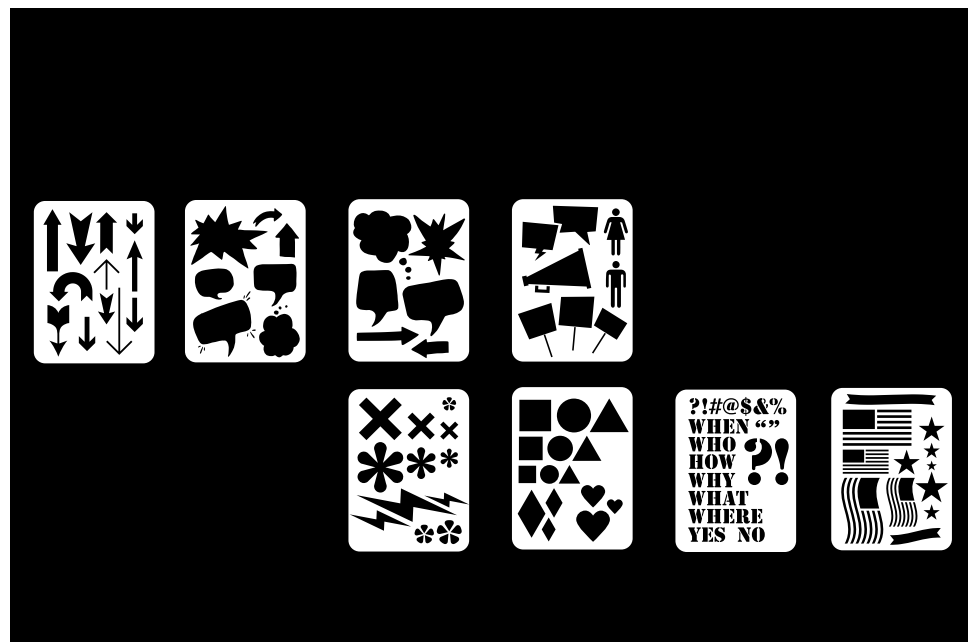
A Canvas of 3D Type

Supplying visitors with markers and paint pens in an outdoor setting and in an accessible manner would mean they also needed a canvas on which to mark. I chose to create 3D type as a canvas because it addressed several problems identified in the prototyping phase. During the chalk activity, the prompt eventually became lost, derailing the context of the activity. Working with large type would ensure that the prompt was always visible, giving context to the responses. A large-scale, 3D canvas would also physically elevate the activity, making it accessible for visitors of various mobility levels and provide visitors enough physical space to feel comfortable contributing to a shared canvas. Finally, I hoped the surprising nature of giant, freestanding letterforms would "delight and invite" those passing by.

Material

Cardboard was a strong material choice for the final installation for several reasons. It's affordable and disposable, communicating a sense of ephemera. Using a material indicator that the installation was temporary would prompt visitors to interact now. Cardboard is also an approachable, familiar material that feels comfortable on which to draw. Finally, when layered, it is strong and heavy, and can withstand the heavy winds at Alki Beach.

I see her and
WONDER



Prompt

Because my findings indicated that people would be likely participate in peer groups, I wanted to design an interaction that could serve as a conversation starter. In critiques, designers often initiate conversations by using the phrases “I like,” “I wish,” and “I wonder.” This served as inspiration for the final design. I hoped that using the prompt “I see her and wonder,” would encourage visitors to contribute a question to the canvas. Over time, I hoped that the letterforms would accumulate questions which would then serve as additional conversation starters. This also created interesting opportunities for visitors to interact with one another by giving people the chance not only to contribute a question, but to answer or respond to one already on the canvas.

Stencils to Ease Intimidation

To ease the intimidation of drawing or adding a written response to the letterforms, I designed and laser cut a series of stencils to pair with the letterforms. Visitors would have the option of using the stencils to embellish or frame their contributions and creatively respond to others' responses. Even if a visitor opted not to use the stencils, I hoped their presence would indicate that the activity was meant to be fun and easy.



Construction

The letterforms were laser cut from nearly 300 layers of cardboard and affixed together with more than 3.5 gallons of wood glue.





Part V

INSTALLATION + FINAL THOUGHTS

Overview

The 3D letterforms were placed in the plaza early in the morning with paint pens, markers, and stencils. I contributed an example, adding a question to the surface. Throughout the day, I observed and interviewed park visitors—some who contributed to the installation and some who did not.

Final Observations

A Community Response

The installation attracted participation by wide range of visitors. As expected, people tended to interact in groups, but the installation drew significantly more adult participants than previous prototypes. Whereas before, when parents encouraged children to participate with the prototypes, with this installation, parents also took part:

Dad: “Wow, that’s beautiful. That’s engineered.”

Child: “Come write something with me, Dad.”

Dad: “Okay, but it’s going to be simple.”

People were attracted by the installation’s scale and surprised by its material, many stopping to speculate on how it could have been constructed. When a crowd grew, people would invariably end up contributing. Visitors seemed to feel a sense of ownership over the piece. The West Seattle Blog—a community news site well known in West Seattle—documented the installation’s progress throughout the day. I observed people return to the installation throughout the day to see how it had grown. Participants lingered at the promenade, discussing the piece, brainstorming what to write, and observing how others reacted to their messages.

CONTINUED



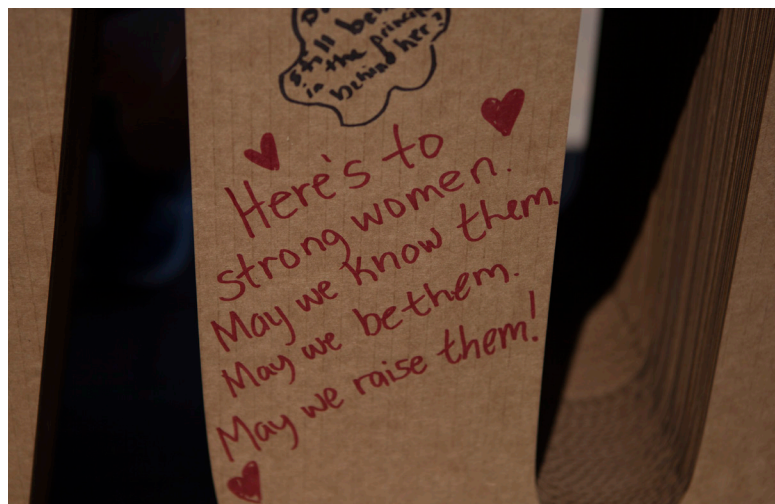
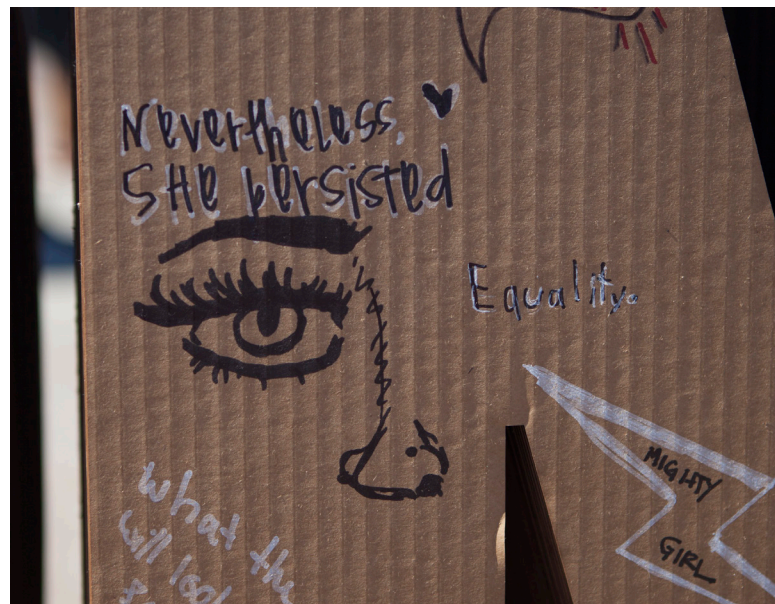
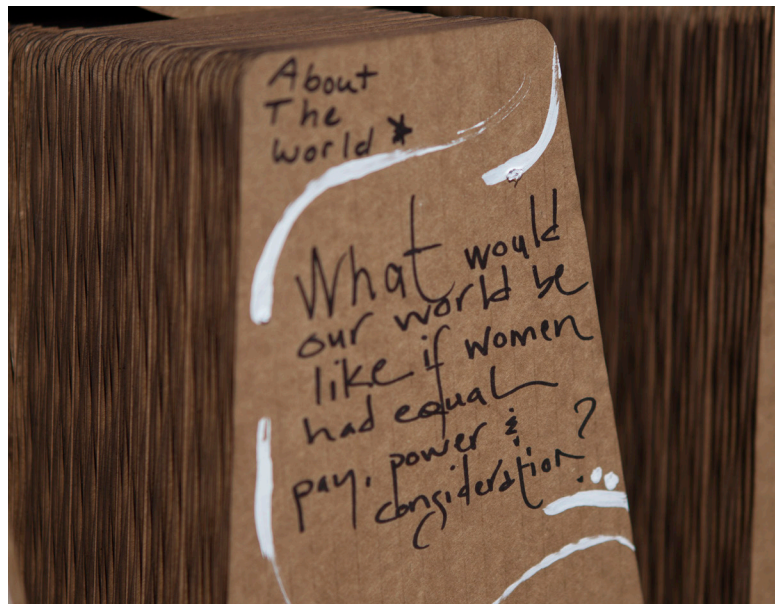
A Feminist Response

Some participants interpreted the installation as a feminist commentary, the piece accumulated messages and drawings related to that idea throughout the day. It was an unintentional effect, but an exciting one nonetheless.

A Space for Dialog

One revealing exchange demonstrated how the installation prompted visitors to interact with each other. When a group of young boys began scribbling on the piece, adding fatuous, child-like comments (“Your mom is the Statue of Liberty!” and “Your mom is cheese!”) a group of women who had been observing the interaction began adding comments and drawings of their own to the letterforms. They wrote messages of love, inclusion, and peace next to the children’s additions, as if to counteract the scribbling and elevate the level of discourse on the display.

Exchanges happened elsewhere on the installation. Visitors circled messages they agreed with, highlighted other responses with the stencils, or added comments or addendums to other contributions. Some also signaled disagreement by striking through prior responses (but in a way that the prior response was still legible). The prompt seemed to have its intended effect: promoting conversation in-person among peer groups as well as on canvas.





Reflections + Limitations

In reflecting on the end results of this research process, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the work. Though I believe the final installation successfully engaged and delighted visitors, I wonder to what extent that success is replicable. Some of the first participants contributed thoughtful, beautiful drawings to the letterforms. They set the tone, elevated the level of discourse, and inspired subsequent visitors to provide similarly thoughtful contributions. If the first mark had been a scribble, foul language, or an obscene drawing, would subsequent visitors have perceived value in adding their thoughts to the canvas?

The nature of this kind of participatory work carries a hard truth: it only takes one zealous visitor with a pen to destroy the work of others. I hoped that by engaging in a visitor-centered research process, I could mitigate this risk and create an experience that could support multiple types of visitor motivations.

On the day of the final installation, I spoke with several people who, although they lingered to observe, did not contribute a drawing or reflection. One man aptly noted that the activity only lent itself to short quips and “biased out” input from introverts. It was a fair critique.

Reflection is a very personal experience, as is the act of expression. While I have the tools as a designer to facilitate the latter, the former is harder to gauge. Some people find value in participating. Others are content to reflect on their own terms.

Acknowledgements

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But most of all: Erick. The day I found myself walking out of our apartment drinking day-old, reheated coffee from a used Starbucks cup (no time for dishes!) was the day I realized I was a truly a graduate student. That was last Thursday. I'm sure you realized it and felt the impact long before then. Thank you for everything.

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*What does
she remind you?*

