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CITY OF FREDERICKSBURG: PHASE TWO REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Phase II of community conversations around the Fredericksburg slave auction block focused on developing parameters and potential design ideas for the auction block and the immediate space surrounding it. There is widespread interest in a number of ideas, including connecting the space around the auction block to other relevant areas in Fredericksburg and having stories told at the block be rooted in the dignity and resilience of those involved. These also included a shared desire to tell the truth, but differing understandings of what aspects of the truth should be emphasized; and, a shared desire for the block to promote reflection and action with differing understandings of what actions such reflection would prompt. Additionally, there are persistent concerns over inclusion, ultimate control, and City follow-through that are consistent with the findings of Phase I. One highly encouraging sign is that participants in the Phase II sessions more frequently expressed an understanding of and respect for those with views different from their own. This represents some of the positive potential from the continued work on this project.

The Coalition is a dynamic global network of museums, historic sites and memory initiatives that inspire millions of people each year to explore the parallels between past and present, build bridges of understanding, and take action on pressing social issues. Since its founding in 1999, the Coalition has grown to include over 250 members in 65 countries, working across regional and thematic networks to facilitate collaboration, exchange and action. The Coalition is the only network of museums and historic sites that connects past and present to foster dialogue and action on critical contemporary issues.

INTRODUCTION:

The City of Fredericksburg has contracted with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience to complete an interpretive initiative that consists of three phases:

1. An audit of the African American History stories the community is telling, including those surrounding the auction block and how community members feel about those stories.

2. A series of public brainstorming sessions to collectively imagine how the slave auction block might be further interpreted.

3. A series of public dialogues that bring the community together to talk about major themes that have been revealed during the first two phases.

As a result of the initiative, the community of Fredericksburg will:

- more deeply recognize what historical narratives are currently being told and how they affect contemporary discussions in Fredericksburg;

- reimagine the space (virtual and physical) that surrounds the slave auction block;

- and, come together in order to better recognize the varied perspectives of their fellow community members.

The Phase II Report (below) shares the findings from the second phase of the process. Phase II consisted of six public sessions in August and September of 2018, designed to elicit ideas and collaboration from community members about how the area around the slave auction block could be transformed. **Whereas Phase I was an opportunity to express individual experiences and viewpoints, Phase II asked participants to clearly bring those view points to the table, but to also begin working on collaborative and shared ideas that could be held in common across the community.** While difficult, challenging, and still very much in process, this transformation from "I" to "we" is the core work of reconciling with the past and building strong futures that embrace an entire city. This journey is still ongoing and incomplete, with strong areas of disagreement, but it is a journey the community has begun. **The community of Fredericksburg should be commended for doing the hard work of coming to recognize that success in Phase II does not mean that each individual's point of view would be represented in its entirety, but that success has come from the "give" and "take" of creating new thoughts together.**

During Phase II workshops, participants engaged in varying individual and small group activities designed to help all participants engage with integrity. One activity asked them to describe their goals and design ideas by choosing 5-10 descriptive words from a set of commonly used words, another activity asked participants to sketch out their ideas and goals, and a third activity asked participants to compare and analyze other memorials, markers, and forms of remembrance. **Key points of agreement and disagreement as well as frequent design suggestions are summarized below.** The Coalition is not making a recommendation about the final design of the memorial. Rather this work is designed to produce a community-generated set of parameters for future artists and designers to work within. Those parameters, which will also draw on information learned in Phase III, will be included in the final project report.

In reviewing the key points below, it must be recognized that the community continues to disagree about the best location for the slave auction block. As cited in the Phase I Report, there are many different viewpoints and reasonings behind each of the positions that community members hold. As one example of this, a formal request by the NAACP to City Council regarding the location has been included as an appendix this report (as per part of the NAACP's formal request). **Though the preferred location of the block was an ongoing point of discussion, it should be noted that it was not the express focus of these sessions; participants answered all questions in reference to their personally preferred location.**

ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES:

Truth-Telling

There is broadly shared desire across participants that truth and truth-telling be central to all aspects of the process moving forward. This shared desire cuts across differing visions for the future of the auction block, its location, and the space around it. In picking five to ten words to describe a successful design, "truth/truthful" was tied with "reflective" as the most frequently chosen words across all participants. Other associated words like "educational," and "The Story" also ranked highly.

This spoken desire for truth in the future implies an unspoken belief that some truths have been left out in the past. Throughout conversations, people regularly added "untold" or "hidden" to

describe the truth they want to see shared, indicating that those stories had not been widely shared in the past. One participant provided the following example, “The story is being told, Lee, Lee, etc. We need to inform the story about slavery.” This sense of past absences appears to impact how people approach both the block itself and the process of discussing the future of the block, with varying degrees of faith in the process and with a greater sense of absence tied to the participants’ lowered sense of faith.

The broad-based desire for truth in the present is mirrored by a widespread anxiety of omission in the future. People who advocate leaving the block in place regularly refer to the desire to remove it as “erasure,” “white-washing,” and “forgetting.” On the reverse side, some who advocate for moving the block do so with the belief that the complete story can be told with greater information elsewhere. As one participant said, “If we really want to move forward it would all be in a museum where we truly learn history.…”

While there is general consensus on the facts of Fredericksburg history and many strong, local resources to access it - including community groups, the university, the National Park Service, public history leaders and oral traditions - as Fredericksburg considers future truth-telling, it is important to acknowledge that, regardless of location, any available space will still be insufficient to tell all of those facts. **The important next step is to move from the broad-based conversation about a desire for truth to a more specific conversation about what truths are most pressing to tell in the context of the auction block.** Phase III will begin this conversation. The following comments illustrate how people have already begun to call out truths which are important to emphasize and/or present.

When asked to elaborate on the idea of truth/education/the story, people defined those terms in the following ways:

- “Truthful - to be accurate and acknowledge its history from many directions”
- “Truth - disruption of life for people, the POW and /kidnapped people, horrific, american capitalism, economy”
- “Truthful - education, real story, not sugar coating”
- “Truthful - these are untold stories we will give voice reckoning with truth and past”
- “Real Truth - healing for all people”
- “Educational - tell the full story, no room for misinterpretation”
- “The Story - tell entire story, individual stories, riverfront walking trail, story panels”
- “The Story - the full complete, unabridged, names and numbers, sacred, inspirational, spiritual, relocate, part of a larger, complete story”

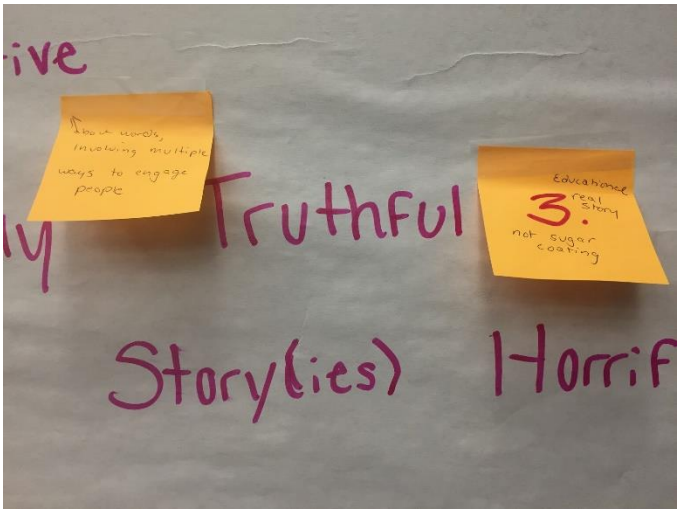


Image 1

Quality of the Story - Dignity and Resilience

"**Dignity" and "resilience" were the third and fourth most common words used during the word activity and represented a specific desire that the truth be conveyed in a respectful way; and, that the truth should emphasize the resilience of the individuals, families, and communities most negatively affected by the auction block.** While these terms were proposed independently by local residents, ideas of dignity and resilience are common elements in current public interpretations of slavery. These ideas, their presence and their absence, are consistently intertwined in the way history has been told in the U.S. Many of the initial public narratives of slavery were ones that deemphasized the dignity, agency, humanity, and resilience of enslaved people and their descendents. While needing to be recognized within a uniquely Fredericksburg context, these ideas are in line with wider "best practice" around current memorialization of slavery in the U.S.

When asked to elaborate on the ideas of dignity and resilience, people said:

- "Dignity - respect and resilience"
- "Dignity - untold story"
- "Dignified - emphasize personhood, bringing back dignity to those who were harmed"
- "Dignified - respectful, humanizing"
- "Dignified - sense of pride not shame, respect"
- "Resilience - to show the resilience of the enslaved but also the resilience of their community over time here in this place"

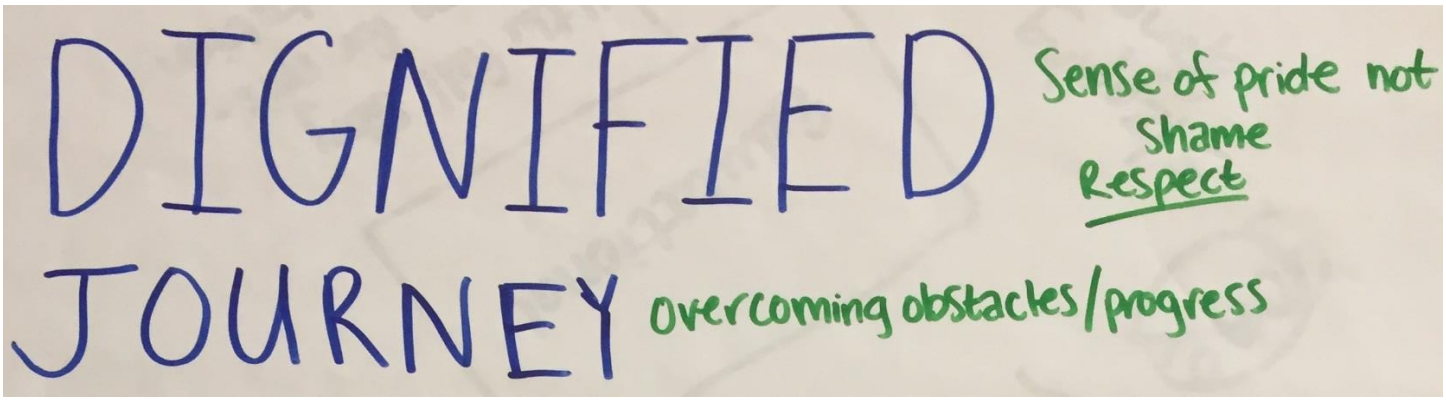


Image 2

Horror, Accountability, and Accessibility

One area very much on participants minds, but on which there was less clear consensus, was the degree to which the horror of historic events should be a part of the space, how important it is to identify those responsible for enacting that horror, and how people thought the inclusion of these ideas at the block would impact the accessibility of the site. Words like “horrific,” “confront the ugliness,” “dark,” and “jarring” were a part of many conversations.

For participants using those words, the words were an important facet of telling the truth. An accountability-related question that participants raised, was if enslavers in the area could and should be identified through the interpretation at the block. There was larger uncertainty in conversations about the need to move from identifying the horrors of slavery to identifying the perpetrators of those horrors. **The unsettled nature of this conversation is reflected in the almost entirely verbal nature of the comments, with few groups being able to generate written consensus of their discussion to share with the larger group.**

There was concern that not identifying historical enslavers would diminish people's current abilities to reflect on their own roles and responsibilities in building a healthier community today. On the other hand, participants were concerned that identifying enslavers would leave descendents of enslavers and other, primarily white, visitors feeling blamed for past actions, leading them to disengage from the material and process.

The Wider Geography - Connected to Other Spaces

The desire to tell the truth was not limited or confined by the space around the slave auction block and participants frequently shared an interest in wanting to connect the auction block to other relevant spaces in Fredericksburg. Words like “linkage to other sources,” “stepping stone,” and “journey” were commonly selected from the word lists. Connecting to other spaces was also a common theme expressed in the sketching activity.

Participants, who expressed differing opinions on other issues, desire the slave auction block to be connected to other spaces. For example, "Please consider a three part system where it starts at the park where slave ships came in with educational tools around, then head to another location with more educational tools, and end at block (where there is not much change, just protect it and maybe add a tasteful, simple, sign on street sign as well as expanding the end of the block." Or, "build a historic memorial near the river, a welcoming type of monument that children might enjoy like the Alex Haley group of statues at the Annapolis waterfront. If a Freedom Monument were created on the river near Shiloh Baptist Church Old Site, for example, a trail to freedom could be marked from the slave block site on Caroline Street. Residents and visitors would be able to trace this pathway to freedom, and celebrate it." For others (see the first image below, which was explained in greater detail verbally) the block was moved before becoming the center of a wider conversation. **Regardless of the location of the block, people share a sense of geographical focus for the storytelling, primarily highlighting downtown and waterfront locations.**

As with truth-telling, people's approaches to *how* to tell this wider story is influenced by the stories they see being already told and those left untold. This wider geography of public history, memory and memorialization shapes people's approaches to both this process and their wider community. For example, commenting on the current prevalence of Confederate history a participant said, "I remember [the history of slavery] everyday when I am driving on Jeff Davis Hwy, going to the schools, seeing the statues, street names, restaurant name and a walk downtown will bring you to shops of the Confederacy. There's a Trolley for tourism of the Confederacy of Fredericksburg. I see nothing joining us as a whole when this city still has oppressed people here." As with truth-telling around the block, conversations around other locations must be aware and nuanced about the currently existing content landscape. **To achieve its greatest impact, reinterpretation of the auction block needs to work in concert with similar efforts across the wider landscape of public history and memorialization.** For more on the current memorial landscape of Fredericksburg see the second part of the Phase I Report.

When asked to elaborate on connections to other spaces people said:

- "Stepping Stone - telling the past and the future, to museum and other (free) spaces that tell the story"
- "Journey - pathway from site and connected to other monuments, i.e. trail to freedom"

When asked to draw this people created:

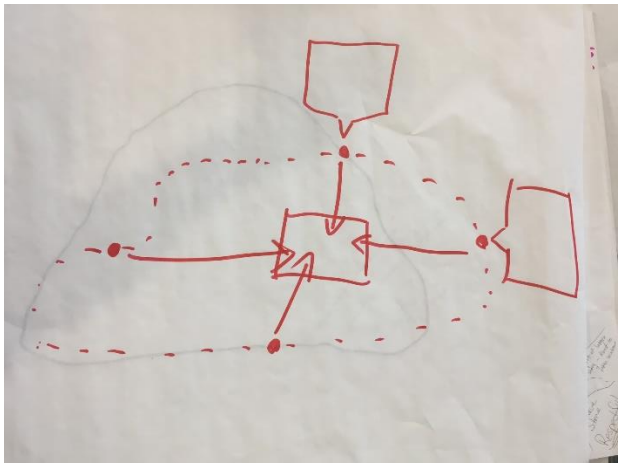
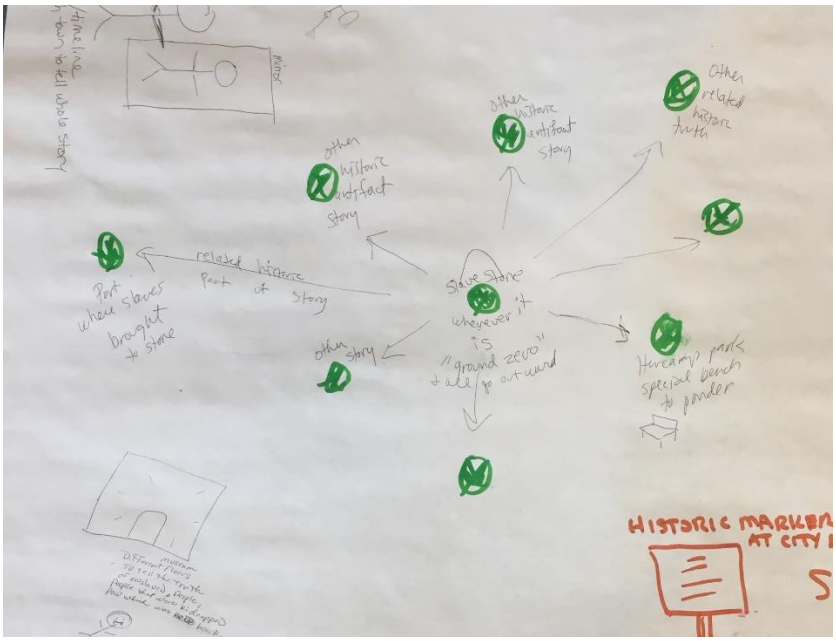


Image 3



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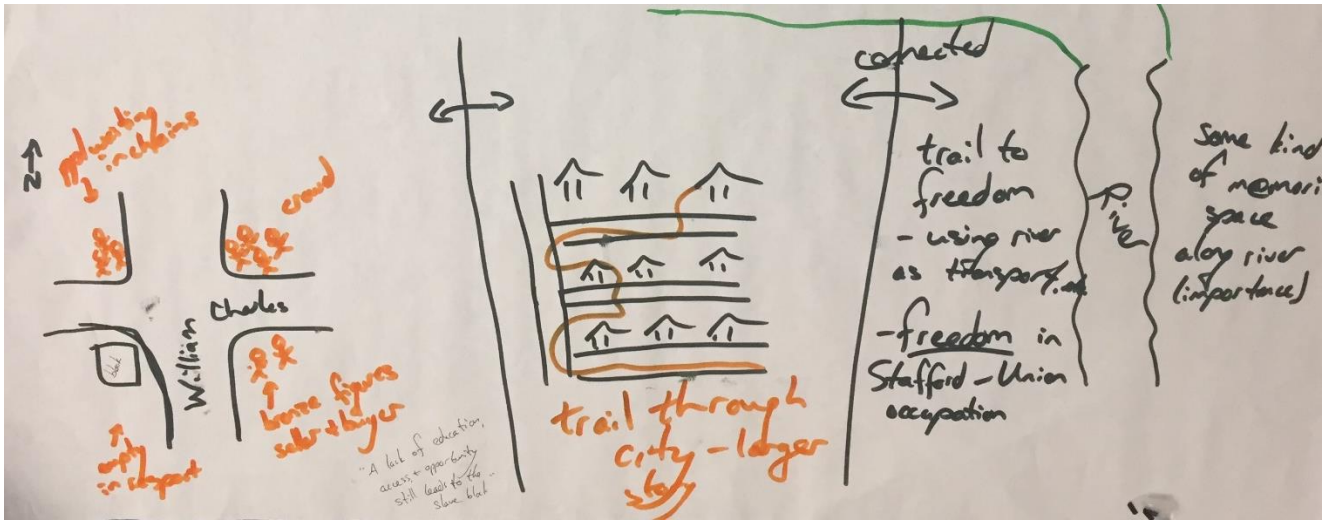

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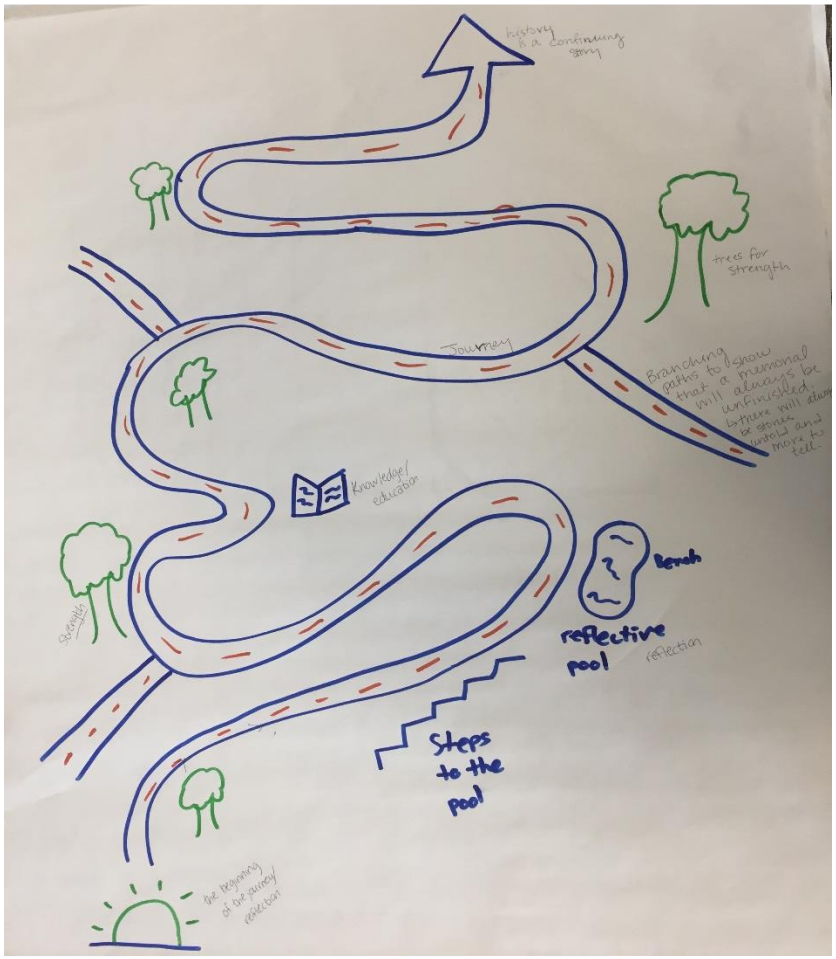

Image 6

Impact - Being Reflective

Participants want the design to encourage reflection in the present. There was wide interest in the space enabling and encouraging people to grapple with the facts and experiences of the block and to consider the implications for themselves and the wider world. Other words like “contemplate” and “thought-provoking” also ranked highly offering support to this idea.

One of the most common parallels drawn by participants was with Holocaust memorial sites in the U.S. and Europe. In particular, they referenced those sites’ messages of non-repetition. This idea of “never again” was regularly mentioned as the reason participant’s desired reflection. For example, “Has to show impact from descendants within the community. It's important for people to see how devastating it was for the slaves and it's important today for people to know to be a better society - so that we don't have a repeat.”

For some, the impact of the site began with and focused on information leading to reflection. For example, “Our hope is that as people encounter the block, interpretive signage connects them to more information and invites them to reflect in a meaningful way.” **While for others, the point of reflection moved beyond non-repetition and information and into actively making a just society.** For example, “A key point is how, beyond memorials & proper reflection, past hurt and injustice might be transformed into a force for good, advancing community betterment & a ‘Kingian’ vision inherent in the American Dream.” Or, “We need young people to look at this and think about their responsibility to their community.”

When asked to elaborate on the idea of reflective/contemplate, people said:

- “Reflective - Thought Producing”
- “Reflective - what lessons are learned”
- “Reflective - Quiet place to be with thoughts”
- “Reflective - thought provoking”
- “Contemplate - think about and understand what happened and how far we have come”
- “Contemplative - physical space to interact and think about it”

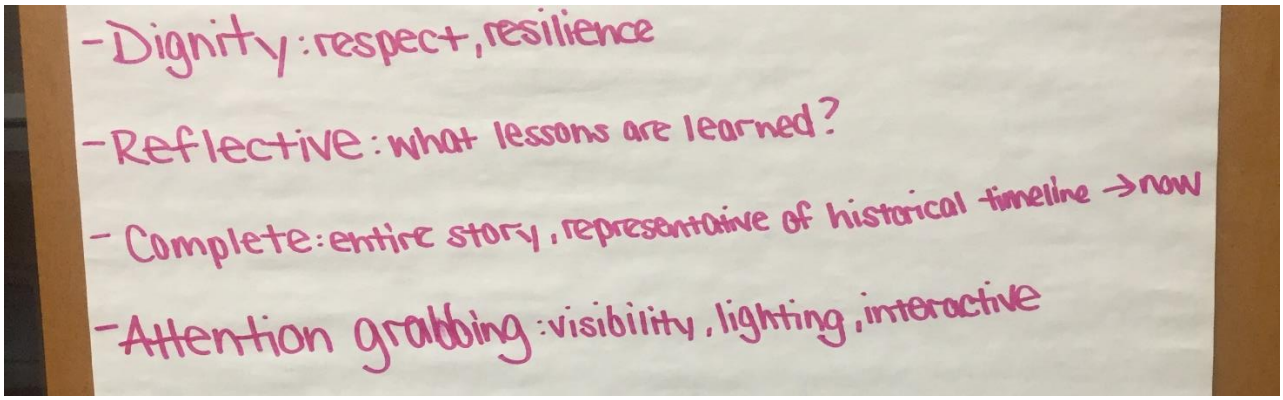

Image 7

Who's History, Who's Voice?

An ongoing, sub-conversation that influences many of the wider conversations, but is only made explicit occasionally, is about stakeholders and control of the stories told. **In particular, this arises around whether the story will be understood as a primarily African American, primarily white, or a shared story, and if the process of designing interpretation around the block will be controlled by and/or privilege the views and voices of African Americans or white residents.** Not addressing this concern inhibits the conversations from progressing any further. It should be noted that belief in "who is a stakeholder in the story" and "who should have control of the story" are not always linked in the same way for all participants, black or white.

Examples of how people have expressed this:

- "I'm White. Black voices were Silenced during slavery. I strongly believe Black Voices Must Be Heard, way more Loudly, now, about The Black History surrounding the slave stone. It. Is.Their. Story. It is about their literal Lives and Limbs."

- "I want them to know thoughts and voices about the rock. I don't want there to be a censor. Everyone's own understanding is different and valid to them."

- "There is much more to the history [of the block] than just for African Americans... There needs to be a broader story told about the rest of the world."

- "Do they want us here to just tell our story? Do they just want to tell the white story? Or, should we do a counter-narrative? Or, should it be a narrative to tell the combined story?"

- "They don't feel the pain, like they don't understand the pain, like they aren't a part of this as all - they don't feel the collective guilt. I want to be at this table because I want the strength of my people. The fact that I'm sitting here is a miracle; our people survived. Let's tell the whole story."

- "I was born and raised in Stafford County. I feel very strongly about my position about the block. And, I feel like my opinion shouldn't matter. [because I am white]."

- "I have no place here. Every time I see people allowing their kids play on it…there is such a level of disrespect that is enraging. My perspective comes from a place of empathy. That's all I've got to give."

- "Sometimes it can become Afro-centric and it needs to be a shared vision….. Without your perspective, your empathy, your understanding, it becomes one-sided. And, African Americans are really diverse in our perspectives too. You do count, and it is important that you do share. We welcome participation of everyone…."

Hearing New Voices Building New Trust

While strong individual relationships exist across the city, trust in an inclusive and committed process continues to be weak. For example, "It is the avoidance and the exclusion. I served on the parks and rec years ago, and all the black community wanted was a swimming pool in Mayfield. One wasn't added until it was used to attract white people to an adjacent area. Same thing with the education. Carrots get dangled in front of the black community all the time." Another example of this, "There is a lot of fear that nothing will happen. And that comes from, not just a racial thing. People can build things here, but lots of people have ideas that there isn't follow through on. So let's see if anything happens or if this is just lip service. To feel comfortable people are going to have to see clear, concrete steps. People need clear communication." Similar concerns, that nothing would ultimately be accomplished, were voiced by nearly every participant in Phase I.

There is new trust being built though as evidenced by this participant, "I think Fredericksburg is ready, it's a big ask to look in the mirror and confront yourself, but I think it's able to." **No single project will create an entirely fresh page for the community, but successfully being inclusive, responsive, clear in communication, and effective in follow-through, will enable other projects to begin from a stronger place.**

Listening to others' thoughts, opinions, and experiences in Fredericksburg is a core aspect in the process of coming to terms with the space around the slave auction block. **While listening does not imply changing minds, it is, like many of the hopes for the auction block itself, rooted in creating empathy.** Phase II saw an increase in comments that, while not always changing opinions/positions, did show increasing understanding and connection to other people in Fredericksburg. For example:

- "I am starting to understand better that thoughtful people of all ages and races have valid reasons both for leaving the slave block and for moving the slave block."

- "I think that the most powerful way to achieve the things that the people who want to move it want, is actually to leave it there. But I can now see that it might be important to move it in and of itself."

- "I'm for staying, we do stations of the cross and that is one of the places we stay. Then I started thinking about what if the Jewish community after the holocaust had asked for the camps to be bulldozed, I think it would have happened. So maybe for white people we need to hear the people who are having their people shot in the streets every day. I don't really have a final opinion, but I think that if the NAACP took a hard look and decided to ask for removal it should have carried more weight."

- "Someone was telling me today, tear it down, and I think that was his way of saying I'm opposed to what happened there, and it is his way of being liberal and open minded, and opposing inequality…. I'm taking a lot of relief in that it is staying. I don't want people who are young to not understand what happened there."

Conclusion

Throughout Phase II, points of census on aspects of design and the future of the auction block have emerged, particularly a desire for truth-telling, respectful and dignified history, and connecting the block to a wider landscape of history and memorialization. There are also emerging areas of disagreement and learning between participants, particularly around issues of ownership and control and how to blend accountability and accessibility. There are also ongoing concerns that continue to shape participants' approach to the process, including concern over the best location for the block and deep-seeded worries over trust, communication, and follow-through from both individuals and the city. Importantly, the process is already helping participants listen to each other more; and, if not coming to agreement on all things, participants better understand why they hold different views.

Phase III is a series of six public dialogues, two during each month throughout October, November, and December that are meant to encourage community members to speak with each other about the past, present, and future of the slave auction block. By the end of Phase III, the community of Fredericksburg will have parameters for a Request for Proposals for enhanced interpretation of the auction block; providing designers and others more clarity about what the community wants. Additionally, by the end of Phase III, the community will have clearer guidance about how to move forward in this work after the Coalition's contract is concluded.

APPENDIX 1:Word Cloud

This word cloud was generated from the words selected by participants in the Phase II word identification activity. Words that were used more often in the activity are larger and those used less frequently are smaller. The word cloud was generated using www.wordclouds.com

Image 8

APPENDIX 2: NAACP Report

SLAVE AUCTION BLOCK REPORT

September 17, 2018

Based on continued community input,
Based on increased awareness and interest in the slave auction block,
Based on the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience's findings in the Phase One Report,
Based on discussions held at the September 11, 2018 meeting, and
Based on the ongoing involvement of the Slave Auction Block Committee, the following findings and recommendations are identified.

FINDINGS

1. Space is not adequate to tell the complete story of slavery and African American history of Fredericksburg.

2. Expansion at the present location may have a negative impact on local businesses.

3. Leaving the slave auction block in the present location is polarizing.

4. Based on the Coalition's findings regarding slavery and segregation, African Americans are rarely included in public history materials.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The NAACP Slave Auction Block Position Statement, dated September 18, 2017, be reaffirmed.

2. This Report of the Slave Auction Block Committee be included in the Coalition's Phase Two Report.

3. The Fredericksburg Branch NAACP requests that the City reconsider its position and, with the NAACP's involvement, move the slave auction block to an appropriate location where the complete and authentic story of African Americans can be told.