

Contextualising Colston: a Case Study for the Reconfiguration of Contested Heritage through the Composite Medium of Historic and Contemporary Values

Amy Crellin and Melissa Kirkpatrick

Calls for the removal of contested monuments and statues have become familiar, globally. Movements such as ‘Rhodes Must Fall’, decolonising universities in the UK and South Africa and campaigns against Confederate monuments in the USA have triggered cultural debate on public statuary with colonial associations. This leads to questions such as: how are the evolved meanings of monuments and statues mediated over time? How can memorials be reconfigured to reflect contemporary social and political values whilst preserving heritage? Is the answer iconoclasm? Can monuments be ‘decolonised’ whilst remaining in situ? And can architecture and design be used as a *composite* to interact, preserving monuments whilst providing contemporary interpretation? A *composite approach* combines past and present context and values, juxtaposing contemporary and historic artifacts.

Memorialisation of monuments with colonial associations could be addressed in different ways. This paper identifies three possible strategies. These alternative approaches to future memorialisation of contested heritage are examined and objectively evaluated. It introduces and reflects on ‘Contextualising Colston’ as a case study for re-appropriation. ‘Contextualising Colston’, a collaboratively designed proposal from 2018 that seeks to re-appropriate Bristol’s statue of Edward Colston, is presented as one of many possible design methods of dealing with contested heritage.



Figure 1:
Perspective render of proposed
'Contextualising Colston' memorial



Figure 2: Historic England Immortalised
Exhibition Proposal render

- 1 Laia Colomer, 'Black Lives Matter and the Archaeology of Heritage Commemorating Bigoted White Men', Science Norway, 2020 <<https://sciencenorway.no/archaeology-opinion-racism/black-lives-matter-and-the-archaeology-of-heritage-commemorating-bigoted-white-men/1709994>> [accessed 7 July 2020]; Joanna Burch-Brown, 'Should Slavery's Statues Be Preserved? On Traditional Justice and Contested Heritage', Journal of Applied Philosophy, (2020), p. 4.
- 2 Colomer., p. 7.
- 3 Tuck Langland, 'Iconoclasm Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow', Sculpture

There are three major approaches to dealing with today's contested monuments: preservation, removal or reconfiguration. Allowing contested, colonial monuments to remain poses cultural, social and political problems in a contemporary context. Though heritage has a positive valence, a holistic representation of all historical perspectives is not achieved with this approach. Marginalised voices are forgotten and belittled, colonial voices dominate, resulting in perpetual white supremacy and Eurocentric values. Colonial representations may result in amplified reactions amongst people of colour, due to unresolved historical trauma and racial segregation that still exists today. "White society has actively resisted critically reconsidering the significance of these commemorative statues", especially since the principal outlook of cultural heritage sectors tends towards heritage preservation in its original form.¹ The secondary approach, of removal, represents a subtraction. Removal may be seen as a form of iconoclasm and erases the lessons of history, yet could be a powerful pedagogical opportunity to re-educate the public about contentious histories, creating lasting impression on public memory as a movement towards justice.² However, controversy is often raised around where the limit for the removal of commemorative colonial statues is drawn and what societies would do with removed statues as well as their plinths.³ Colonial figures may be absolved once removed from public critique. Often motivated by contempt, removal poses problems surrounding the protection of heritage, particularly monuments with listed status, which could be undermined. It is therefore unconstitutional to deface monuments.

A reconfiguration could be created through a *composite design medium*, which is additive rather than subtractive. It allows aspects of the former

to remain either in its entirety or in an evolved configuration. A *composite approach* is a critical reinterpretation that can encompass different forms and allows for multiple narratives to be manifested. A richer layering of history and meaning can be achieved with this approach, incorporating twenty-first century contexts and present understandings of history whilst retaining the original concept of the artefact. Public symbolism may be rebalanced, with changed meanings from honouring to reflecting. Colonial figures can be held accountable, retained within public consciousness, whilst acknowledging injustices. New forms of commemorative heritage accept the ethical “responsibility of being inclusive in our heritage practice” and benefit modern civic democracy.⁴

‘Contextualising Colston’ utilises a *composite approach*. It is a proposition that seeks to subvert the Grade II listed bronze statue of Edward Colston. Erected in 1895, the statue lies in a prominent locale in the centre of the city of Bristol. Colston was a Bristol philanthropist and, as a director of the Royal Africa Company, his source of wealth was generated from the triangular slave trade. The monument’s inscription: “Erected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city”.⁵ However, twenty-first-century values and anti-colonial movements have induced a sense of dynamic reinterpretation, illuminating the narratives of marginalised ethnicities, in this case of the African diaspora. During the UK Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, the contentious statue was toppled, paraded around the city centre and thrown into Bristol Harbour. The removal is a subtraction. Prior to the toppling, Madge Dresser notes: “Using public funds to re-contextualise the statue with new plaques and counter memorials [...] would both preserve and enrich Bristol’s symbolic urban landscape and provide for a more honest and inclusive sense of Bristolians’ shared identity.”⁶

Originally designed for Historic England’s ‘Immortalised Exhibition’ by MSMR Architects, ‘Contextualising Colston’ offers an alternative narrative. It is an addition rather than a subtraction, a metamorphosis of past and present. The addition extends the original meaning of the statue, situating it within a wider contemporary framework. Colston’s altruism is recognised, allowing the statue to remain standing. However, he is positioned at the wheel of a ship, reaffirming his position as master and slave trader, enclaved amongst the enslaved onboard, his chained human cargo. This represents his source of wealth and his position of power. The inspiration for the scheme comes from the eighteenth-century slave ship engravings produced by the Society of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, with their unforgettable depictions of human beings as mere commodities.⁷ A landscape design in the form of a slave ship hull creates a contemplative space, honouring the lives of every enslaved person aboard. Each figure is cast in bronze, on a par with Colston. The enslaved

Review, 70.1 (2021), 22-26 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/07475284211010742>> (pp. 25-26).

- 4 Lagland.
- 5 Historic England, Statue of Edward Colston (1997/2021) <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1202137>> [accessed 20 May 2021].
- 6 Madge Dresser, Obliteration, contextualisation or ‘guerrilla memorialisation’? Edward Colston’s statue reconsidered (2016) <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/obliteration-contextualisation-or-guerrilla-memorialisation-edward-colst/>> [20th May 2021].
- 7 MSMR Architects, ‘Immortalised’ (unpublished document, 2018), p. 1.

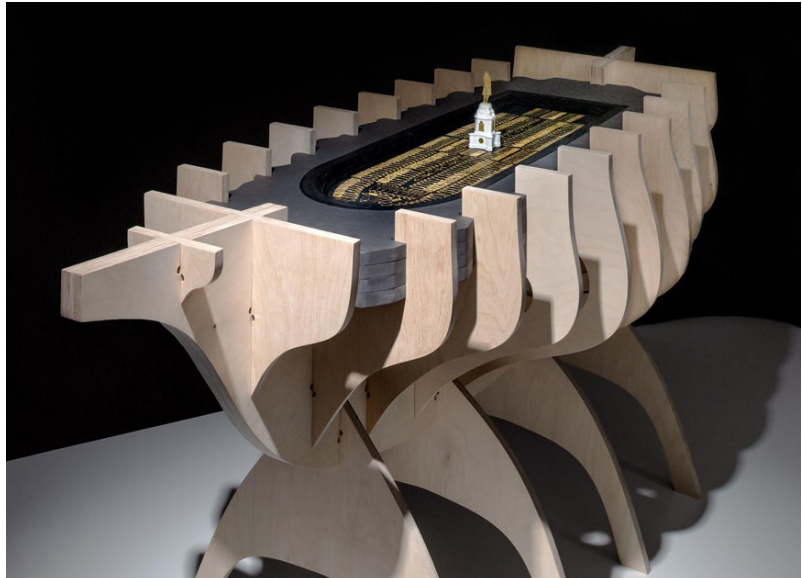


Figure 3: Finished piece in boat form, showing proposal

are individually expressed, infilled with varying materials, reflective of their individuality.⁸ The arrangement is intended as a memorial garden, providing a civic landscape in a prominent public space, to ensure the original statue cannot be conceived without its enriched context.

Anonymous graffiti artist Banksy, native to Bristol, proposes another example of reconfiguration of the statue using a *composite* response to address the empty plinth. A satirical sketch proposes retrieval of Colston's statue from the river and replacement atop the plinth. Instead of standing straight, the statue is slanted. It is angled towards an additionally commissioned bronze statue of the Black Lives Matter protestors, depicted pulling him down. This reconfiguration allows the statue to remain, preserving history, whilst acknowledging the monumental contemporary events, which as Banksy notes were "a famous day commemorated".⁹

Reflecting on the potential contribution of design reconfigurations to contemporary attitudes, architects and artists can act as agents or mediators to intervene and re-appropriate contested monuments. Re-contextualising statues *changes their meaning*, endowing them with new stories and memories. Marginalised subjects are made visible through interventions and new narratives can reconcile the entanglement of conflicting memories. Cabinet minister Robert Jenricks notes that "monuments are almost always best explained and contextualised, not taken and hidden away".¹⁰ Following the real events of the statue's removal, questions of where statues should be relocated and how they should be contextualised can be addressed with *composite mediums*. These examples highlight the differing forms *composite approaches* can adopt.

Possible limitations of re-contextualising are the difficulties in judging appropriateness of interventions that respond to sensitive and contested

- 8 MSMR Architects, *Immortalised: A Design Competition, 2018* <<https://historicengland.org.uk/get-involved/help-write-history/immortalised/competition/>> [accessed 20 May 2021].
- 9 Tom Ravenscroft. 'Banksy proposes reinstating Edward Colston statue as part of slavery memorial', *Dezeen* (2020) <<https://www.dezeen.com/2020/06/11/banksy-edward-colston-statue-slave-trader/>> [accessed 20 June 2021].
- 10 Tom Gillespie. 'Controversial monuments should be 'contextualised' not 'hidden away', cabinet minister says', *Sky News* (2021) <<https://news.sky.com/story/controversial-monuments-should-be-contextualised-not-hidden-away-cabinet-minister-says-12190260>> [accessed 20 May 2021].

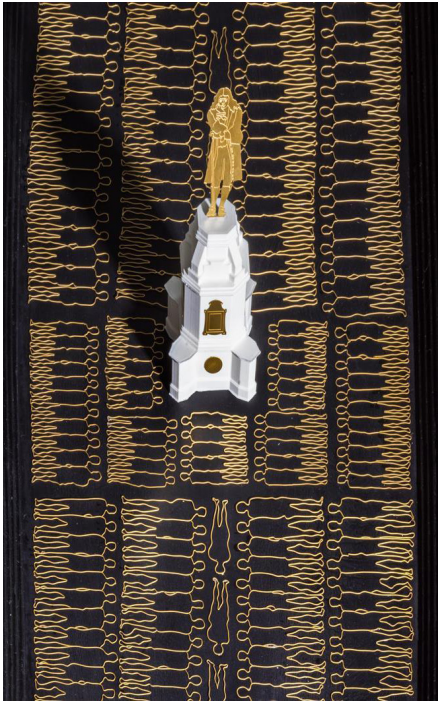


Figure 4: Close up of model showing Edward Colston statue surrounded by slaves

issues. Different groups and individuals may have alternative perceptions and responses to the original intentions of the creative intervention. Design is subjective. Managing symbolism can be difficult. The scale of intervention or reconfiguration could also be questioned; all voices may not receive equal representation. Commissioned designers may be outsiders and may misinterpret marginalised communities. A discussion of MSMR's design highlights how difficult it is to re-contextualise effectively. It suggests that the symbolism of the design could be perceived as insulting rather than respectful as the African figures are depicted passively, in outline with non-human materials, and Colston's remaining elevated position could be regarded negatively.¹¹ This is far from the intention of the designers but remains an unconsidered response to the design. Embedded colonial attitudes can persist, even amongst the self-aware. Emphasising negative aspects of colonial history contributes to equality, but also to understandings of how racism pervades throughout society.

On Contextualising Colston, an architecture student of Kenyan origin did not perceive walking over the silhouettes as insulting yet suggested that "if the silhouettes were to stand all around Colston staring at him" the communicated message could be enhanced.¹² This is a compelling suggestion. If further developed, meaningful community consultation and participatory evaluation with Bristolians of African ancestry would provide additional enriching insight, embellishing the design validity, allowing cultural nuances to be introduced and marginalised voices to influence the built environment.

Following the toppling of Colston's statue, there is still clear importance to displaying the statue in the context of real events. At present, the statue is on display at Bristol's M Shed museum alongside protestor's placards. A survey invites residents to decide the statue's future. Artist Marc Quinn has created a design addition, 'A Surge of Power (Jen Reid)'. The resin and steel sculpture was proposed as a replacement for Colston's plinth, depicting a Black Lives Matter protester who assisted in the felling of the original Colston statue. Lack of engagement by public consultation resulted in an indeterminate outcome by Bristol City Council for the new statue's planning application. Although appealed, the ultimate dismissal was seemingly determined by a single Planning Inspector. Despite this, the statue was secretly installed and then removed by Bristol City Council the following day.

A lack of transparency between the public and the council still remains. City Mayor, Marvin Rees, outlines that "the future of the plinth and what is installed on it must be decided by the people of Bristol. An independent group, the 'We Are Bristol History Commission' are surveying local opinions in collaboration with the local authority, on possible futures for the statue and remaining plinth."¹³ The commission themselves note that

11 Burch-Brown, 'Should Slavery's Statues Be Preserved?', p.11.

12 Joseph Mwaisaka, Interviewed by Amy Crellin, 23 October 2021.

13 Bristol City Council, We Are Bristol History Commission, 2021 <<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/policies-plans-strategies/we-are-bristol-history-commission/>> [accessed 30 October 2021].

“the least amount of support” amongst the public is for leaving the plinth empty, however this is the outcome that currently indefinitely remains.¹⁴

The power of the local authority, in ignoring the initial planning application, undermines the democracy of the planning system. If planning decisions are made by single individuals, a diverse cacophony of local voices and ethnic communities remains unrepresented. These voices must be represented in decisions, and statutory efforts to ensure diverse planning committees and decision-making groups should be considered. Whilst the later consultation approach is democratic, disconnection exists between this initiative and the town planning consents process. Rigid procedures with lack of exchange still prevent productive negotiations from taking place. The planning system is seemingly in need of reform to allow for flexibility, cooperation and increased community participatory consultation.

Are the current delisting mechanisms extensive enough for contested heritage? Historic England describes listing as “the term given to the practice of listing buildings, scheduling monuments, registering parks, gardens and battlefields, and protecting wreck sites”.¹⁵ Listing allows buildings and sites to be protected, preventing future alterations which would result in the loss of their significance. Listed buildings and sites must possess “special architectural or historical interest”.¹⁶ Delisting is a reversal of this process.

Delisting can be an evidently lengthy and complex procedure, since “[t]he vast majority of buildings that are listed have been correctly identified as having special interest”.¹⁷ Buildings can only be delisted if they no longer possess special architectural historical interest. Historic England’s criteria for delisting does not seem to take into account changing perspectives. History is continually re-understood as our society changes. In the case of Colston’s statue, delisting could allow for more flexible interventions. However, the statue still possesses historical significance, meaning it does not fit delisting criteria, and there is a twenty-three year history of unofficial and official responses, resulting in inaction. Such inaction in response to efforts for social change may perpetuate marginalisation and cause emotional damage, maintaining white hegemony within the built environment and national narrative.¹⁸ Had there been definitive decision and action over the 23 years, would the statue’s debated toppling have occurred?

The listing and delisting process is therefore inadequate for contested heritage, with no mechanisms to reflect on contemporary attitudes. The current categorisation of listing or delisting is exceedingly polarised and exclusive, rejecting consideration of the spectrum of distinct opinions, whilst community participatory consultation is also not deemed essential for delisting applications. Historic England provides advice for local

14 We Are Bristol History Commission, Meeting Summary: June 2021, 2021 <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/5246996/History_Commission_Meeting_Summary_28_June_2021.pdf/d66f7ef9-b854-b65c-e614-7f9ffb39e313?t=1635264914007> [accessed 30 October 2021].

15 Historic England, What is Listing?, 2019 <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/what-is-designation/>> [accessed 20 June 2021].

16 *What is Listing*.

17 Historic England, Removing a Building from the List, 2019 <<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/guidance-de-listing-building/removing-building-from-list-jan19/>> [accessed 20 June 2021].

18 Colomer, ‘Black Lives Matter and the Archaeology of Heritage Commemorating Bigoted White Men’, p. 1.

authority delisting decisions, institutionalising the system, whilst it is inaccessible to members of the public. In addition, in an architectural context, delisting is not as familiar a process to architects as listing. Delisting mechanisms arguably need to be enhanced to allow for re-contextualising or delisting contested heritage. New grades of listing for contested heritage with varied allowances for recontextualisation may be achievable, supported by appropriate research and consultation. If recontextualisation is an approach to be adopted, architects could use their skills and knowledge of town planning procedures to assist communities. Furthermore, the addition of context through architect designs and artistic visual representation is an amelioration over merely 'politically correct' plaques.

To conclude, architects and artists can act as agents of change, using creative practices to tackle the anachronistic colonial narratives of contested heritage. This will give subaltern voices equal weighting and address contemporary epistemological injustice. *Composite approaches*, which can adopt a multitude of forms, are a form of addition. This reconfiguration reimagines contested heritage, allowing enrichment and layering of historical and contemporary attitudes. Marginalised voices can be represented whilst allowing for heritage preservation. They are favourable to removal, which is a subtraction. The power of built environment agencies in dominating decisions and perpetuating marginalisation should be considered. Delisting and planning processes may need to be reviewed, with community participatory consultation and broadened criteria to facilitate this change.

This case study has caused us to reflect that a *composite approach* can be applied to architectural history curriculum. According to this approach, pedagogy from a 'western perspective' would still be an important part of architectural education. However, equivalent weighting must be given to marginalised voices. Like monuments, architectural history has long been written by colonisers, ignoring the experience and agency of the colonised. Postcolonial theories should be introduced into schools of architecture. The curriculum should co-construct both national and local narratives. Dominant viewpoints should be challenged so that co-narratives can exist. This will allow all voices to be heard equitably, embodying a curriculum with greater equality that seeks to undo the curriculum's current white hegemony. A *composite approach* should be reflected in all aspects of architectural education and practice today.

Biography

Amy Crellin and Melissa Kirkpatrick are students and alumni of The University of Sheffield School of Architecture. They collaborated with a small team to create MSMR's 'Contextualising Colston' whilst completing their RIBA Part I experience. They are both of mixed ethnicity.

Amy is an architect in training and researcher of British-Hong Kongese heritage. She is interested in contextual, cross-cultural architecture informed by past, present and future. She is studying a postgraduate degree, supported by a RIBA Wren Insurance Association Scholarship and the Sir H.K. Stephenson Studentship. She has global practice experience in London and Hong Kong on heritage façade retention, Knightsbridge Gate and East Kowloon Cultural Centre. She has undertaken research, developing a digital library for historian Peter Blundell Jones' legacy and conducted participatory studies with Zimbabwean communities, ('Make It Grow'). Her undergraduate project, 'The Tricorn Centre: Resurrection, Preservation', was nominated for the RIBA President Dissertation Medal, receiving the Robert Cawkwell Prize.

Melissa is an architect of British-Jamaican heritage from Bristol. Her thoughts surrounding her own heritage and hometown inspired 'Contextualising Colston'. She is a keen advocate for social issues including equality, mental health and sustainability within the architectural profession. She is an ambassador for the Architect's Benevolent Society (ABS) charity and a member of the Architects' Mental Wellbeing Forum. Her MArch dissertation, 'Mental Wellbeing and the Architecture Student', was sponsored by the ABS and supported by the RIBA. She has delivered various talks on the subject. She is currently at EPR Architects in London, working on hospitality projects with a focus on heritage and retrofit, which fuel her interest in history.