



Public Memory for the People

Public Memory and Memorials Lab
2024 Partner Convening Report

MASS DESIGN GROUP



The 2024 PMML Partner Convening cohort gathered at MASS Design Group in Boston, MA.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IN NOVEMBER 2024, MASS Design Group convened project partners to cultivate a “heart-and-mind trust” around the unique challenges of projects rooted in public memory and memorialization. By fostering cross-sector relationships among the dedicated individuals working to reclaim space and uplift community stories — at a Lipan Apache cemetery in Texas, a house of worship in Chicago, and a peace institute in Rwanda, to name just a few — our aim was to spark a community of problem solvers, empowered and better equipped to bring projects to life.

What emerged is an emboldened community of practice, forged in deep respect and a set of shared inquiries: How can we reclaim our public spaces through monuments and spaces of memory that unite us, foster healing, and advance collective liberation? How can we support justice and build agency in public space? With this report, our goal is to broadcast our shared learnings, strengthen our partners and partnerships, and invite new voices to build the field.

This report is a manifesto for a people’s public memory — a collaborative case for memorial space-making practices that center our shared humanity.

WHAT

A people’s approach to public memory

Overwhelmingly, we found ourselves articulating a shared mission and philosophy: we are in pursuit of justice through art and history in the public realm.

We are inspired by *people’s histories*, which acknowledge the injustices of power and celebrate the contributions of ordinary people.

We believe that spaces of memory are integral to creating an inclusive commons where collective agency can be activated through recognition of our past.

WHY

Our liberation is bound together

What’s at stake? Without a people’s approach to commemoration — one rooted in belonging, curiosity, togetherness, and agency — we will continue to cede our so-called public spaces to those with the resources to control land and influence politics.

Spaces of memory — such as memorials, preserved sites, place names, and cultural institutions — provide collective guidance, like the stars at night. Let’s chart a course towards empowerment and love.

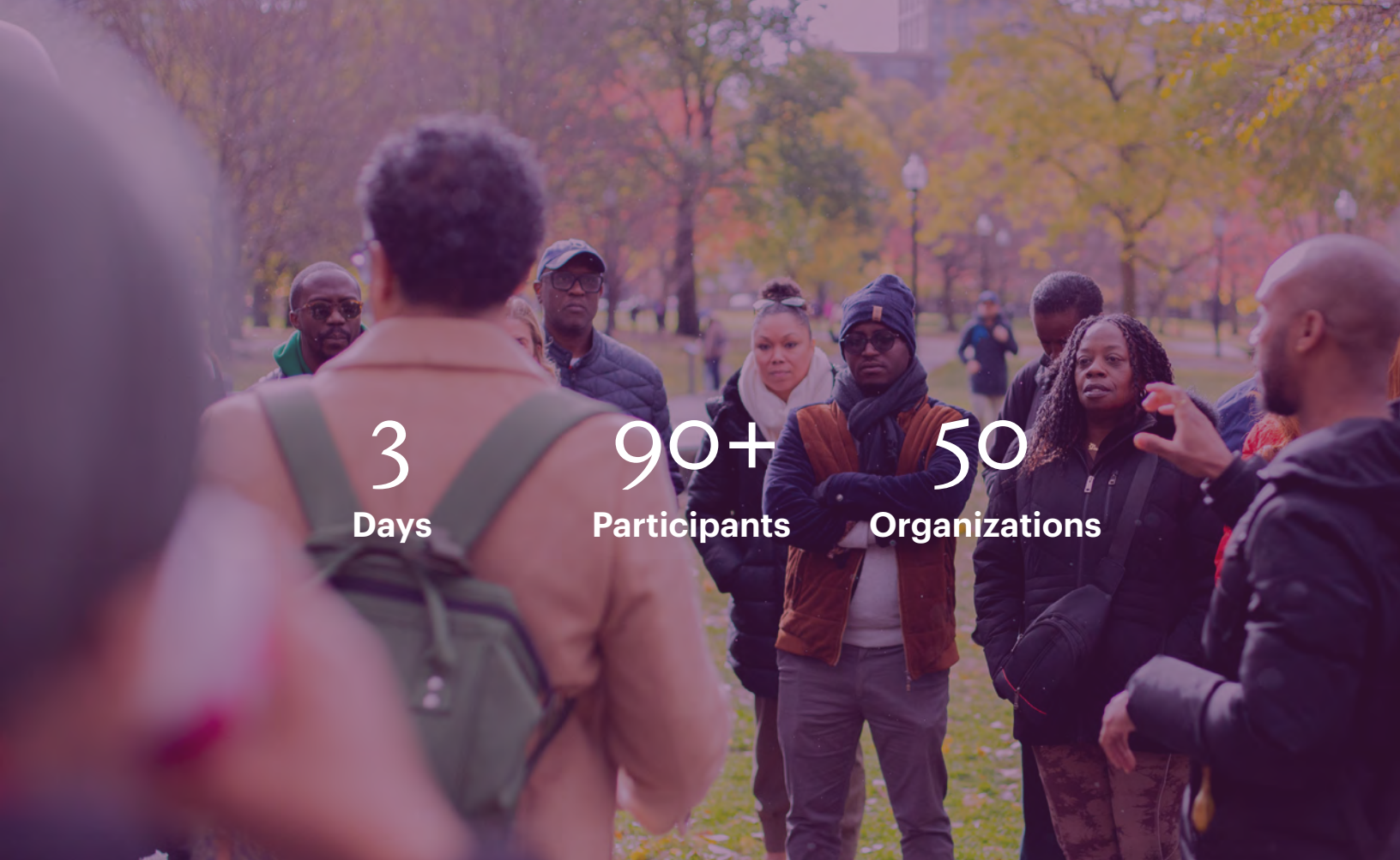
HOW

Together, bravely, with care

The advice we shared was both incredibly vast and necessarily incomplete. This report reflects three core tenets:

- 1** We build spaces of memory **together**, through diverse partnerships and relationships of mutuality.
- 2** In the face of erasure, we **bravely** center people, embracing the complex truths of lived experience.
- 3** We design experiences that model and catalyze **care** as integral to broader processes of reckoning and repair.

Read the full report for deeper insights and more work ahead.



3

Days

90+

Participants

50

Organizations

WHAT'S NEEDED

Ongoing field-building

The 2024 PMML Partner Convening was an exciting start, but there is more work to be done. From our time together, we've identified the following areas of need:

- **Community.** We must continue to think expansively to find allies, research aligned tactics, and build momentum.
- **Resources.** Going forward, we need to share more skills, expand access to funding, and invest in diverse talent.
- **Documentation.** We must invest more deeply in tracking and sharing the stories of process and project impact to demonstrate the value of a people's approach and set a precedent for other efforts.

Above: The 2024 PMML Partner Convening cohort gathered at *The Embrace* and 1965 Freedom Plaza on the Boston Common.

WHAT'S NEXT

Use this report & join the conversation

- **Practitioners:** Use this document to advocate for and further develop the people-centered methods articulated here, identify partner alignment, and get projects built. Let us know what's working and what's not.
- **Funders:** This Convening cohort has a combined need of **\$85 million**. Use this report to evaluate how your funding portfolio could better support public memory work — and how it could be more responsive to the needs of grassroots leaders in the field. Let us know how else you'd like to be involved.
- **Policymakers:** We need to learn from your perspectives as well. How can this emerging community of practice work alongside civil servants and elected representatives to expand public representation in public space?
- **All:** Visit our website for updates about future gatherings. Stay in touch:
publicmemory@mass-group.org



Above: Convening participants during workshops at MASS Design Group in Boston, MA.

2024 PARTNER CONVENING AGENDA

PROMPTS

Experience and meaning of place

- Why and how is a physical, spatial experience necessary for your project to realize its impact?
- What have you observed and/or learned about the role of materiality and permanence?
- How does your project account for multiple place meanings and how they change over time?

Accessing and allocating resources

- What has been your path to raising funds?
- Which tools have been the most helpful in understanding and navigating your funding needs, opportunities, and priorities?
- How are you anticipating the needs for operations and activation after (or before) the “ribbon cutting”?

Team care and growth

- Work in memory and memorialization can be emotionally demanding, and taking on a capital project often requires unforeseen time and skills. What does support or care for your teams look like?
- How do you position your work in a lineage of efforts that came before?

Community involvement

- What has been successful about your community conversations?
- Where is there room for improvement or growth? Who would you say is missing from the work that you do?
- What kinds of programming or public use do you understand to be integral to the impact of this project or work?

Interpretation and narrative control

- What obstacles have you encountered regarding authorship, ownership, and historical accuracy?
- How are you making space for multiple truths?
- How do you position this work within the landscape of public education?



SCHEDULE

Wednesday, November 20, 2024

Welcome Reception

5:00 - 8:00 PM

Thursday, November 21, 2024

All Day Workshops

9:00 AM - 5:00 PM

Friday, November 22, 2024

Site Tours & Closing

9:00 AM - 2:00 PM

Clockwise from top left: Site visit to the mural at Dewey Square by artist Jeffrey Gibson, work by Tao Lewis at ICA/Boston, *HOLD* by Curry J. Hackett and Gabriel Jean-Paul Soomar at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, and a cultural history tour of Boston Chinatown with the Pao Arts Center.

THE CASE FOR A PEOPLE'S PUBLIC MEMORY

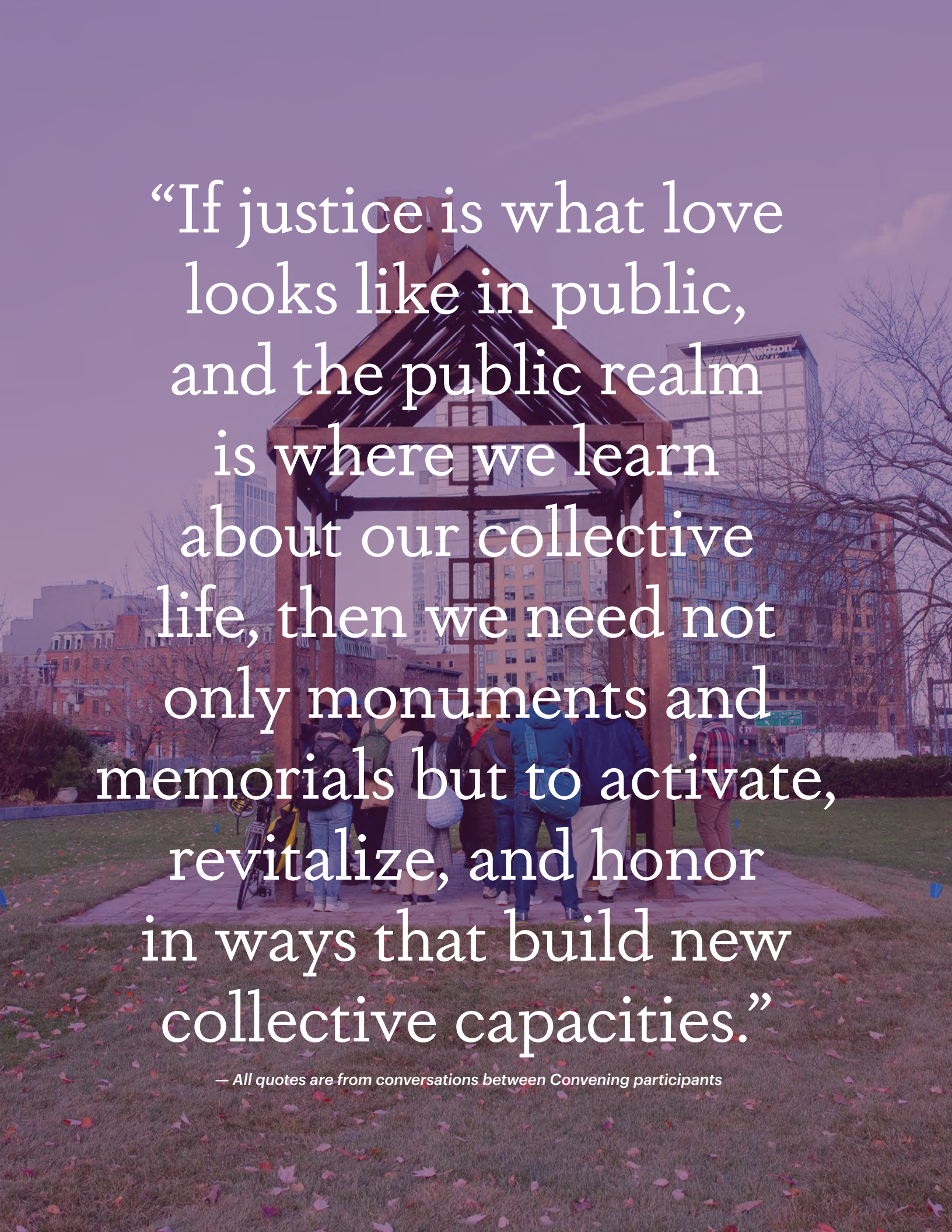
This is the pursuit of justice through art and history in the public realm.

Historically, the core function of a monument was to control a narrative and thereby preserve continuity of power over place. Today, by contrast, many prominent places of memory are compelling us to ask questions and foreground our shared humanity. Rather than preserving existing systems or relations, public memory is being leveraged to drive change.

Monuments alone cannot control a popular narrative anymore. Information and misinformation are everywhere. Truth-telling today must be less about “setting the record straight” and more about helping people to discern the whole truth from the power-serving half-truths and fictions.

We believe that spaces of memory are integral to creating an inclusive commons where collective agency can be activated through recognition of our past. A *people's public memory practice* includes uplifting the voices of lived experience, repatriating and upholding sacred relationships to the land, promoting critical literacy, expanding points of access and participation, investing in cultural knowledge and joy, facilitating trauma-informed conversations and justice-driven programming, and fostering intergenerational exchange.

Right: Convening participants visit *Going to Ground*, a site-specific project by artist LaRissa Rogers that honors Zipporah Potter Atkins, who in 1670 was the first-known Black woman to own a home in Boston.

A group of people are standing under a wooden pavilion in a park. The pavilion has a dark wooden frame and a gabled roof. In the background, there are city buildings, including one with a "verizon" sign. The ground is covered with fallen leaves, suggesting autumn. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, serif font.

“If justice is what love looks like in public, and the public realm is where we learn about our collective life, then we need not only monuments and memorials but to activate, revitalize, and honor in ways that build new collective capacities.”

— All quotes are from conversations between Convening participants

THE CASE FOR A PEOPLE'S PUBLIC MEMORY

Without a people's approach, we continue to cede our so-called public spaces to those with the resources to control land or influence politics.

Without an empowered and diversified field of public memory practitioners invested in people, the public sphere will remain defined by monuments that only matter to some, and only serve the interests of those who control resources. Thankfully we've seen a shift — already well underway — to a collection of strategies and orientations that foster belonging rather than exclusion; curiosity instead of reverence; togetherness over division; and agency over pacification.

Belonging

"I belong here." When we asked about the importance of physicality and place, our partners reflected upon the importance of creating spaces of comfort, access, and safety. Without this intention, public monuments can be alienating while others are exclusionary by design.

Curiosity

"I seek to learn." The physical experience of the public realm provides important educational opportunities that exist outside the bounds — and beyond the legislation — of school curricula. Without attending to the full, informal educational power of place, Convening participants described the risk of missing a critical opportunity to engage the broader public around issues not covered in classrooms. Done well, the spatial and experiential aspects of public memory have a unique ability to capture attention and inspire deeper inquiry.

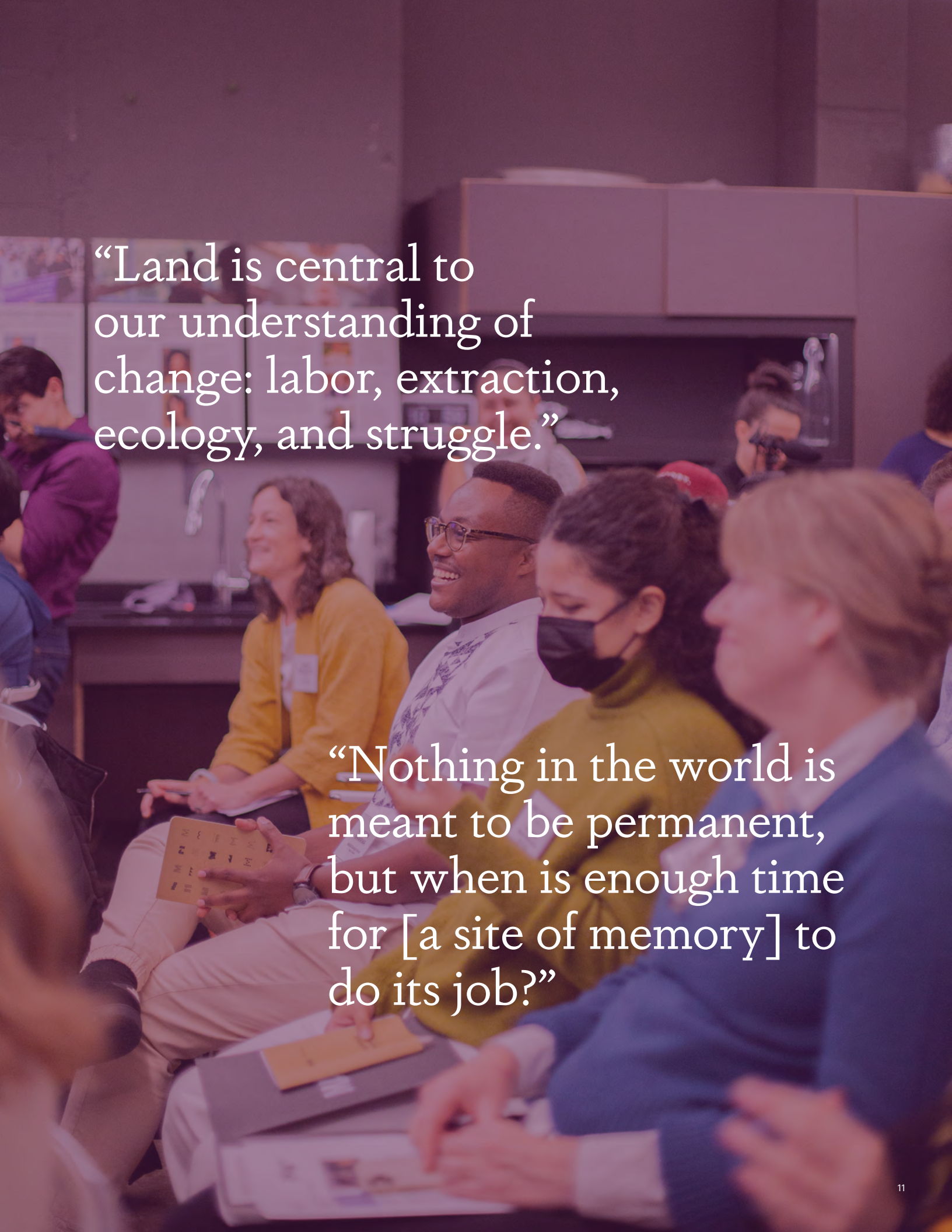
Togetherness

"We thrive together." The importance of places to gather was a common thread throughout the Convening workshops — for celebration, grieving, social and cultural exchange, and the construction of collective agency. Places that are able to support a range of gatherings will attract investment and remain resilient to change, while more rigid or singular landscapes will often be vulnerable to abandonment and irrelevance.

Agency

"The future is ours to make." Our partners spoke frequently of the necessity for a Call to Action, desiring their project to inspire visitors and point to their agency in shaping the world we inhabit. Rather than accepting our systems, societies, and landscapes as we find them, a *people's place of memory* empowers visitors to shape the world they want to see.

Right: Convening participants during workshops.



“Land is central to
our understanding of
change: labor, extraction,
ecology, and struggle.”

“Nothing in the world is
meant to be permanent,
but when is enough time
for [a site of memory] to
do its job?”

CORE TENETS AND METHODS

The following three categories are guiding principles for a people's approach to public memory — adaptable to the unique contexts in which we work and stories we seek to tell.

Together,

- **Assemble the right team** of local leaders, knowledge-bearers, artists, and technical experts, alongside funders and policymakers.
- **Nurture relationships of mutuality** by aligning shared goals and exchanging supportive services.

bravely,

- **Tell the whole story**, without softening the truth, and through many voices.
- **Center cultural knowledge and cross-generational exchange** to link meaningful and enduring connections to place.

with care.

- **Attend to humanity** through trauma-informed practices and designed experiences that care for the body, such as shared meals or movement.
- **Design for love, with love**, by creating spaces of memory that demonstrate care — while also pushing for broader public processes of reckoning and repair.

Right: The 2024 PMML Partner Convening cohort gathered at *The Embrace* and 1965 Freedom Plaza on the Boston Common.





1. We build public memory together, through diverse partnerships and relationships of mutuality.

► ASSEMBLE THE RIGHT TEAM.

A common theme discussed throughout the Convening was the interdisciplinary nature of public memory work. It takes several specialized — though often overlapping — skillsets to bring a project to fruition. For each sector, our partners reflected upon the importance of doing research to understand the landscape of efforts, both aligned and not, as well as finding partners with existing networks of trust in place. The following areas of expertise were highlighted as critical:

- **Community Leaders.** Whether a project emerges from community leadership or not, it's important to ensure a strong base of relationships where people convene: religious organizations, neighborhood associations, schools, land trusts, community gardens, park stewards, or others. Align initiatives, invite co-ownership, and diversify points of access.
- **Knowledge-Bearers.** Identify and uplift educators, archivists, elders, historians, and interpreters. Co-create place-based interpretation and curricula, and build connections to other sites to engage existing narratives.
- **Creatives.** Involve artists, architects, and landscape designers early to help craft the vision, engage diverse perspectives, and register a depth of understanding. Invest in multi-sensory experiences. Consider both permanent and ephemeral components, such as digital extensions or performance activations, to drive engagement and enhance education.
- **Stewards.** Memorialization efforts benefit from strong programmatic leadership to drive consistent public engagement. When possible, establish dedicated personnel to pursue development opportunities.
- **Technical Experts.** In addition to the architects, engineers, and zoning consultants, seek out financial planning support for cost estimates that carry the cost of construction, fee budgets for a wide bench of consultants, and an understanding of expenses related to operations, maintenance, and programming.
- **Funders.** Build real, direct relationships by sharing personal stories and connecting to cultural urgency. Engage with opportunities at a range of sizes and scales, formal and informal, private and public.
- **Policymakers & Public Advocates.** Look for opportunities to garner support from those in public office. Whether through zoning boards, historic preservation commissions, or public support from elected officials, these relationships can sometimes be make-or-break.



“Create an ecosystem.”

“Invest in the process.”

Left: Convening participants during workshops.

► NURTURE ABUNDANCE THROUGH MUTUALITY.

When it comes to securing project funding, we discussed obstacles such as competition, mission drift, and political variability — as well as scarcity. Scarcity mindsets can work against relationship-building among peer organizations or initiatives. While it can be tempting to apply for any opportunity that comes your way, some grant opportunities can take you away from your mission. Other sources may come with contingencies or rely on changing policy priorities. Our partners shared the following advice in response:

- **Local, Mutual Aid.** Start with small, local organizations, identify shared needs, unite initiatives, and share capacity where possible. Think creatively — beyond money — about how to offer and seek support, such as through pro-bono or in-kind exchanges. Be patient and generous with your collaborators. Reach out to learn from peer organizations.
- **Find Alignment.** Giving and receiving funding is emotional — successful messaging will often benefit from a personal appeal. Dynamics with project supporters do not have to be merely transactional: invite partners to be a part of something important. Even “no” is an opportunity for conversation and growth.

2. In the face of erasure, we bravely embrace complex truths and center lived experience.

► TELL THE WHOLE STORY.

Public representations of history are necessarily selective, but they can still be informed by and invite access to complex truths. In the face of legislated censorship within public education, spaces of memory can provide an alternative avenue for sharing meaningful chapters of history — yet they also come with their own challenges regarding narrative control. In response, Convening participants shared the following strategies for navigating and leaning into narrative complexity.

- **Don't Soften the Truth.** Many will want to sanitize histories defined by violence and dehumanization, but distortions invite ignorance and denialism. Work closely with educators and public historians to develop core messaging, programs, and curricula that don't shy away from difficult chapters of history, but rather approach honest confrontation as an opportunity for growth.
- **Ask Questions, Share Skills.** Create opportunities for visitors to think about something differently. It can be useful to position your work in conversation with dominant narratives to complement what people typically know. Engage with media literacy and informed learning methodologies.
- **Seek Many Voices.** Pursue a wide range of curatorial partners and prioritize lived experience. Maintain awareness of whose voices are being elevated. Look beyond the "official record" and honor the unknowable parts of our histories. Create focus groups and cross-territorial coalitions to test and enrich interpretive approaches. Train community champions.

**"It's important to say
that Emmett [Till] was
lynched."**

► CENTER CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND GENERATIONAL EXCHANGE.

Many participants pointed to the challenge of working at the intersection of groups with differing experiences, connections to place, and cultural backgrounds. In the face of these discrepancies, participants reflected upon how programs and activations that center cultural traditions can create meaningful bridges between communities, contributing to the resilience of a site and its long-term meaning.

- **Connect to the Ancestors.** Especially on public lands, it is important to understand both historical and ongoing experiences of access, exclusion, ownership, and dispossession. This extends beyond acknowledging Native place names and associations to encompass learning from those whose work to champion community voices preceded our own.
- **Identify Cultural Values.** Material and spatial decisions are embedded with cultural, geological, political, economic, and historical significance — for example, granite and bronze are one vocabulary of remembrance but not the only one. It is important to consider: what systems does this project uphold, and which should it try to shift?
- **Seed Cross-Generational Platforms.** It is essential to create opportunities in the process and the design for connecting generations, sharing knowledge, learning, and growing. The youth were repeatedly acknowledged as a priority audience in our conversations, and an area of necessary further investment. Similarly, many cited the need to collect, preserve, and amplify oral histories with community elders.



Above: Convening participants during workshops.

“We are uplifting, protecting, respecting, listening to, and collaborating with knowledge-bearers to link generations.”

“Elevating Black bodies to bronze is a liberatory practice.”

3. We design experiences that model and catalyze care as integral to broader processes of reckoning and repair.

► ATTEND TO HUMANITY.

The process of making space for the truth is not just architectural, and not merely political, but also deeply emotional and interpersonal. Our partners discussed the intersecting challenges of fear, discrimination, prejudice, cultural assumptions, and competing traumas when navigating how history becomes represented in the public realm. Fear of erasure can live alongside fear of exposure; anxiety to achieve a “balanced” story alongside the fear of pushing too hard on power structures. Our partners lifted up the following three considerations for centering our shared humanity by acknowledging that healing and learning start in the body.

- **Trauma-Informed Practices.** Emerging from health care, trauma-informed approaches acknowledge the physical and social impacts of trauma on individuals and emphasize the principles of safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. While these tools are especially important in facilitating community conversations, they are also important throughout the design, planning, and programming.
- **Somatic Literacies.** Our partners reflected upon the value of tending to one’s own body while engaging in the emotional labor that this work requires. Self care is team care. Cultural somatic techniques — and somatic abolitionism, as innovated by Resmaa Menakem in *My Grandmother’s Hands* — understand white supremacy as an embodied experience and seek to develop an embodied anti-racist literacy in response. Additional body-centered team care mentioned at the Convening included sharing meals and laughter, flexible time and space for rest and processing, and reaching out for external facilitation when needed.
- **Experiential Learning.** Spaces of memory should speak to the mind, body, and spirit of all kinds of visitors. Spatial experiences enable kinetic, bodily engagement with a story that reading alone cannot. This may look like pilgrimage or ritual, physical movement, engaging multiple senses, and supporting a multiplicity of physical abilities and dispositions. As designers, we prioritize co-developing an emotional journey with opportunities for visitors to participate in ways that continue to embed meaning into the site over time.



► DESIGN FOR LOVE, WITH LOVE.

In addition to providing care in the process of creating a space of memory, our partners reflected upon the value of creating a space that honors, models, and catalyzes real care as well. This means memorializing less violence and more interdependence; fewer individuals and greater collective recognition. What each space can honor — and how — will be unique to site and context. However, our conversations at the Convening touched upon the following questions as useful provocations:

- **Honoring & Modeling Care.** It is important to consider how design can attend to visitors' needs as they grieve or celebrate, seek community or a moment of solace alone — and what kinds of relationships are encouraged and accommodated. How does the commemorative experience orient us towards one another?
- **Catalyzing Care.** Convening participants emphasized the need to consider how a commemorative project can contribute to broader efforts of public repair. What does real support look like — for individuals, communities, or the land itself — beyond acknowledgement? Spaces of memory can be integral to systemic change when the design calls the public to act.

Above: Convening participants get acquainted at the Wednesday night reception.

“We need truth-telling
that argues for
reinvestment
commensurate to the
injury of the past.”

To our fellow public memory practitioners:

The obstacles are real — and many grow steadily harder to navigate in the present moment. **This work involves not just championing underrepresented histories, but dismantling the myths that prop up injustice.** There is a great deal more to do to reshape our public realms into places that reflect, honor, and uplift the remarkable and enduring power of community-based stories.

From our time together, we've pulled out three primary areas of need as we continue to build the field: a community of practitioners, improved access to funding or other resources, and greater documentation of the impact these projects can have.

Build Community.

Think expansively to find allies, research aligned tactics, and build momentum.

- Stay in touch. Reach out to check on one another. Seek opportunities to gather.
- Use this document to identify partner alignment and uplift other initiatives.

Share Resources.

Exchange tools, pursue multi-scale funding, and invest in diverse talent.

- Advocate for and further develop the people-centered methods articulated here.
- Don't be afraid to share what you know and ask others about what you don't.

Document Impact.

Track and share the stories that showcase the value of a people's approach.

- Build relationships with local documentarians, film students, and journalists
- Seek out partnerships with schools and organizations doing aligned research.

Opposite: The 2024 PMML Partner Convening cohort gathered at *The Embrace* and 1965 Freedom Plaza on the Boston Common.



If funding were available,
this cohort could bring
10 shovel-ready projects
into the public realm in
the next 2 years.

These projects matter.

Time and time again, we have seen grassroots organizations successfully build immense community momentum and steward a successful, responsive design process only to face funding obstacles to get their projects built.

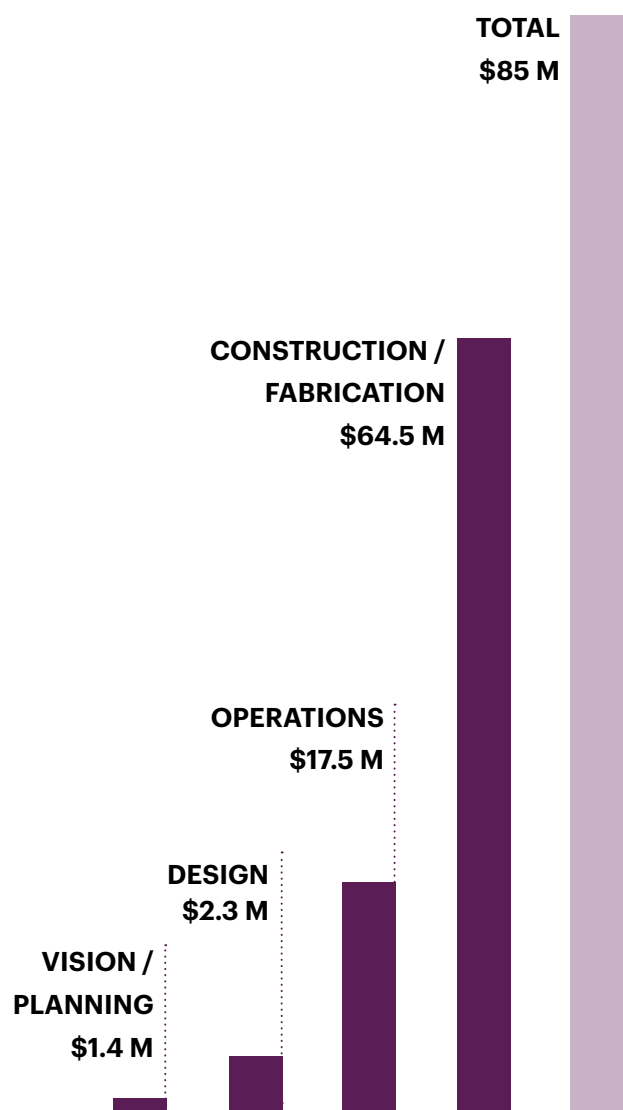
Participants noted funding challenges that included the inflated cost of construction materials, personnel costs, lack of visibility, and political misalignment or outright censorship. Many also lacked funds for design and community engagement.

**Funds needed across all
25 projects represented at
the Convening total just
\$85 million.**

Together, we can ensure meaningful public recognition of stories that need to be told.

Convening projects, by the numbers:

- 8 call for **collective healing** in the wake of violence: destigmatizing victims of gun violence, honoring victims of hate crimes, and launching an international program from post-genocide Rwanda.
- 7 celebrate moments of **civil rights activism**, including the Selma to Montgomery March, training for emerging and established movement leaders, and the push to desegregate a school for deaf children in Washington, DC.
- 5 recognize histories of **enslavement and incarceration**, including Japanese internment in North Dakota and convict leasing in Texas.
- 4 uplift community **self-determination**, including a cemetery returned to the Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas, public art for decolonization in the U.S. Territories, and a tribute to local leaders in Poughkeepsie, New York.



CREDITS

2024 Convening Participants

Aegis Trust	Foot Soldiers Park	People of La Junta for Preservation
African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund	Fort Bend Independent School District	City of Poughkeepsie, New York
Arda Design	Gallaudet University	Poughkeepsie Alliance
Big Bend Conservation Alliance	Harmonia Rosales Studio	Purpose Over Pain
Birmingham Civil Rights Institute	Harper's Playground	Queer American Memorials
Bone Collective Studio	Highlander Research and Education Center	Rabbit Rabbit Studio
Boston Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture	King's Chapel	Right to Democracy
Branly Cadet	Louis D. Brown Peace Institute	Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ
Brooklyn Public Library	MASS Design Group	Shirley-Eustis House Association
coleman a. jordan	Mobile Studio	The Somerlan Group
The Conservation Fund	City of Montgomery, Alabama	Studio Limen
Dana King Art	Monument Lab	TEN x TEN
DesignCyphers	National Museum of African American History and Culture	Transform 1012 N. Main St
Embrace Boston	Negative Space	Tsuru for Solidarity
Emmett Till & Mamie Till-Mobley Institute	Nwankpa Design	University of Texas at Austin



Thank you to our philanthropic partners.

The Public Memory and Memorials Lab is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. We would also like to acknowledge crucial contributions from the Hearthland Foundation and the Wagner Foundation.



Above: Convening participants during workshops.

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MASS Design Group is an architecture and design collective with offices in Boston, MA; Poughkeepsie, NY; Santa Fe, NM; and Kigali, Rwanda. Our mission is to research, build, and advocate for architecture that promotes justice and dignity. We support partners to advance their impact through the built environment, including architectural design, master planning, landscape architecture, engineering, and strategic planning, as well as research, evaluation, education, and policy development.