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Exploring the meaning and significance of monuments

What is a monument? What purpose does it serve? Whose story does it tell? And who gets to decide whether it should exist, and where?

These are some of the questions Santa Barbara area school children are considering as they participate in the Making of Monuments, a collaboration between UC Santa Barbara's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center (IHC) and the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation (SBTHP).

The object of their inquiry is a statue of Carlos III, the King of Spain in 1782, the year El Presidio de Santa Bárbara was founded. The statue, which stands in the Presidio courtyard, was presented to the City of Santa Barbara in 1982 as a gift from King Juan Carlos I to commemorate the historical site's 200th anniversary.

But the Making of Monuments is only one of several collaborations between the IHC and the SBTHP, all aimed at strengthening public humanities education. The Trust co-sponsors an internship for students in the IHC's Public Humanities Graduate Fellows Program, which is designed to prepare humanities Ph.D. students for careers as socially engaged humanists both within and beyond the academic setting. The internship enables an IHC graduate student to spend 200 hours during the summer working alongside SBTHP staff members and getting a firsthand view of public humanities in action.

In addition, Anne Peterson, SBTHP executive director, who completed her Ph.D. in public history at UC Santa Barbara, regularly guest lectures in a skills seminar for IHC public humanities fellows that educates them about careers within public organizations and in the nonprofit sector. A trained public historian who went on to become the chief administrator of a major community nonprofit, Peterson's career trajectory provides graduate students with an important example of the diverse paths available to them as highly skilled humanities researchers and educators.

In recognition of their publicly engaged humanities collaborations with SBTHP, the IHC has received the Trust's 2024 Partnership Award. The award "celebrates individuals or organizations who have participated in collaborative efforts that support SBTHP's mission and made a significant impact toward that end."

"We were pleased to award the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center the Partnership Award," said Peterson. "The IHC exemplifies partnership for our nonprofit organization. The IHC staff have gotten to know our organization deeply, and they listen when we discuss our priorities and resources to ensure that we find a project that fits the goals of each organization.

"We have conducted a co-funded internship annually for over five years," Peterson continued, "and last year the IHC brought a teacher's workshop called the Making of Monuments to El Presidio de Santa Bárbara State Historic Park, which included the Presidio Research Center collections, several staff members, and monuments at El Presidio SHP. The project dovetailed perfectly with our own priority of assessing monuments in the park for new interpretation."

The Making of Monuments, created by IHC Director Susan Derwin, a professor of comparative literature, is, ultimately, "a humanities program designed to support civic participation," Derwin said. In this program, elementary school students consider a monument that represents colonial interests and perspectives, and they ask how the public narrative about the monument might be rewritten to reflect the histories of past and present communities that have been excluded from it.

In its broader sense, the program introduces students to the experience of actively participating in democratic practices and processes, in this case by considering the significance of historical memory and public narrative and their role as makers and custodians of those narratives. "There is a need in California for civic learning," Derwin said. "The humanities can help address this need through collaborations,

such as ours, between UC Santa Barbara, the Trust and four elementary schools in the Santa Barbara Unified School District.”

The three-part Making of Monuments program began in the summer of 2023 and concluded in May 2024. In early August 2023, eight teachers with the Santa Barbara Unified School District participated in a week-long workshop at the Presidio that consisted of research in the Presidio Central Archive, discussions, meetings and small-group collaborations. “Working with three Ph.D. students from the Department of History, the teachers explored the meaning and importance of monuments and then used these insights to design activities to encourage students to recognize and reconsider monuments in their communities,” explained Christoffer Bovbjerg, IHC assistant director.

Noted Jen Griffith, who teaches fifth grade at Adams School and was one of the workshop participants, “I felt like both organizations gave me the perfect supportive environment to have autonomy as an educator to create my own curriculum on the topic we were learning about: the definition of a monument and the historical significance of local monuments.

“This enabled me to take my students through an engaging learning proves that gave them the exact kind of first-hand learning experiences that I like to provide in my classroom to provoke investigations of real-world problems, spark intellectual curiosity and deepen critical thinking skills,” she said.

A field trip to the Presidio during the academic year gave school children a chance to get a close-up view of the statue. “They saw the statue in its full context,” Bovbjerg continued. “Well, contexts or lack thereof. It’s sitting in the courtyard at the Presidio without a lot of markers. The Trust staff led the students in a discussion reminiscent of what they worked on in class. They asked questions like, ‘Why do you think the monument is here? Who does it represent? How would you help explain its story?’”

During last week’s visit to UC Santa Barbara, the students applied their newly honed analytical skills to a study of the Gaucho Argentino statue at Mosher Alumni House. They conducted their own research with the help of the graduate students who assisted with their teachers’ workshop last summer.

“The students will finish the academic year with a new understanding of the significance of monuments and the stories they tell, as well as their relationship with

the communities in which they reside," Bovbjerg said. "They will also have developed a stronger appreciation of their own power and responsibility as community members to preserve, change or reimagine the monuments and stories that represent them."

With support from a 2024-25 UC Santa Barbara faculty outreach grant, Derwin noted, the Making of Monuments program is set to begin its second year this summer, with a new set of teachers.

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About UC Santa Barbara

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