

Project Video: The Statues are Still There Transcript

0:00

Project Video. The statues are still there.

0:11

In 2021 the City of London Corporation recommended the removal of the statues of William Beckford, an 18th century slave owner and two time Lord Mayor of London, and John Cass, an MP who was a key figure in the Royal African Company, which from the 17th century trafficked up to 150,000 enslaved Africans.

0:34

However, after the government announced its Retain and Explain policy, the City of London's Court of Common Council voted to overturn their decision to remove the statues and instead retain them with new interpretation plaques.

0:48

Beckford's statue stands in the Grade One listed Great Hall of the Guildhall and John Cass's statue stands in the South Ambulatory.

0:59

In February 2022 it was agreed that the project to reinterpret the two statues would take a co-creative, collaborative approach, working with an intergenerational panel and Commission poets to develop appropriate explanatory plaques.

1:15

This became the Revealing the City's Past project and delivery began in November 2022.

1:23

Culture&, a leading black-led arts and education charity were appointed to work with the City Corporation as creative consultants and to form part of the central steering group.

1:35

Let's meet the team.

1:45

So I'm Errol Francis, I'm Artistic Director of Culture& and I've worked on the consultancy on developing the project.

1:54

Hi, I'm Angela Billings and I'm the Development Director at Culture& and I'm part of the steering group.

2:04

I'm Elizabeth Scott. I am Head of Guildhall Art Gallery at the City of London Corporation, and I am the lead on the Revealing the City's Past project.

2:14

My name's Sam Allen, I'm an arts and heritage consultant.

2:18

I was the freelance Project Manager.

2:20

So what skills and expertise did the steering group bring to the project?

2:24

I think we've brought lived experience to the project.

2:27

The intergenerational panel brought a variety of perspectives actually, as the name implies, different generations, so there were older people and younger people.

2:36

There was also diversity, you know, of background, gender and experience and so on.

2:43

I think the whole thing together meant that I think we had quite a representative group of people to feedback on the project as it was going forward.

2:51

Something I feel that I've brought to this project is the practise of focusing on actions and process and practise and ensuring that equity and ethics are really embedded in the ways we have collaborated.

3:14

The feeling I get when I'm in this space has really changed.

3:17

I think the first time I was here, I felt really overwhelmed by the impact of, you know, the architecture of this place.

3:27

I think it invokes a lot of intense memory actually of events that I haven't seen, but I feel. The whole place has this feeling of grandeur, of regality.

3:43

One of the really pivotal decisions really about the enslavement of African people is the Zong trial that took place here in the 18th century.

3:57

Even though I feel it quite intensely, there's no physical or visual evidence of that, but it feels as if my ancestors have been here before.

4:09

There is a degree of anger about who has the right to be in this space and that has developed over the course of doing this work to the point now where I'm in this space,

4:23

I'm happy that I have an opportunity to talk about the project, but it is not with the same degree of awe and excitement that I had when the project started.

4:34

The more I've had to come into this space, on this project, the less impressed I am by the architecture that awe I first felt in this space and that sort of intimidation.

4:47

The red carpet now doesn't remind me of regality,

4:50

it reminds me of the incredible violence that my ancestors have had to go through to create the wealth of this space.

5:02

Did the project meet the expectations of the steering group?

5:06

I was drawn to the project because I thought there was an opportunity to make a difference in the way that contested statues are interpreted, and especially how art or the work of artists could be part of that.

5:22

But then I learnt that it was different, that a decision had already been made to provide plaques and literary and historic interpretations.

5:32

One of the key things I really wanted to prioritise and bring into the project at the very beginning was to bring Black voices into the space.

5:41

And I wanted that in terms of what we could permanently have on the statue, but also in how the project was formed and worked.

5:51

So I really wanted to build this team that really represented who we wanted to bring into the spaces.

5:58

I was really interested in working with an organisation of the magnitude of the City of London, that has so much power and wealth.

6:07

The statues that are in this space really represent that as well.

6:10

I also really wanted to be involved in this project because I felt very strongly that it wasn't just important to bring lived experience to this project, but it's also really important to bring learnt experience to this project around the interrogation of the narratives of Empire of Nationalism.

6:30

Revealing the City's Past is different because it is one of the first of its kind under the Retain and Explain directive.

6:38

While it was announced in 2021, the guidelines were not

available until the end of 2023 and did not address the nuances, complexities and challenges around the interpretation of statues such as those of Beckford and Cass.

6:54

The project team needed to ensure that they embedded equity, justice as well as artistic and cultural integrity in their approach to all stages of the project.

7:04

What considerations and approaches were important to embed in the running of this project?

7:09

Retain and Explain can't be understood unless you put it in the context of the wider culture wars.

7:16

And I think what it actually does in practice is not just retain the object, the heritage object itself, whether that's a statue or memorial, it also retains the explanation of it.

7:29

The, the, the very thing that really should be subject to much more open debate ends up being actually retained by what the government called the heritage custodian.

7:46

Well, it was sort of barrier after barrier after barrier and you don't quite realise it until when you mention that, you can't quite believe it because you're living in it and working in it.

7:55

You don't realise just how restrictive it has been

7:59

actually. When we started this project, the barriers were less visible than they are as the project has progressed.

8:09

So we started out with actually our proposal was quite, you know, radical proposal, which has been sort of, if you like it, have been externally shaped.

8:19

It's not necessarily to do with what we would like to do in that space, but as we've been saying before, it's been externally shaped and we've ended up with a narrower, you know, it's still, it's still challenging, I think, but it isn't as radical as the original suggestion, I think.

8:40

I think that this will have an opposite effect actually in the long run, because people will look at this and think, is this really a just response, let alone an artistically satisfying one?

8:56

Yeah, absolutely.

8:57

But it's made me go back into like, almost ancient history,

really, to understand what has happened with these statues because, first of all, how offensive they are to people.

9:13

Well, why are they so offensive to people?

9:15

And I think that statues have this unique ability to invoke people and almost animate, animate them.

9:26

And I think that in a sort of unwitting way, you know, even the, you know, the poets who've done these marvellous, you know, text responses to the statues, addressing this effigy as if it's a living thing has really made me realise this idea of reinvigorating something that doesn't deserve to still be alive, actually.

9:56

And it made me think of the way that ancient Egyptians thought about statues or, you know, like Pharaohs and that these statues have a living presence, you know, that they literally breathe and live, you know, and that they had a way of dealing with these, these statues, you know, that they had to be stopped from breathing.

10:19

And this is why so many Egyptian statues, they don't have a nose on them.

10:23

Again, it talks to the space, doesn't it?

10:26

So it's not just, it's not just the, the statue, it's very much about the space.

10:30

And that so much of the story is ingrained in the whole story is ingrained in the space.

10:36

And when you're dealing with the interpretation of a statue, it is, it is inadequate just from that point, isn't it?

10:43

Because it really is the space that needs, needs to be interrogated.

10:48

There's this sense that this is past history until that moment where you're going to reinterpret it.

10:54

And as you said, then suddenly it comes alive again.

10:57

And suddenly the limitations come in.

11:00

And the interesting point, I guess counterpoint to Beckford is, is Sir John Cass in that if you were to look at him, he'd come across as like a pencil pusher, right?

11:10

For the, you know, for the RAC, that's somehow just as dangerous as well, because he's the one that's actually marking those books saying how many people should be on ships, etc.

11:22

And then it's all that.

11:24

It's like the horror of that as well, that actually isn't he OK, he didn't own plantations, but everything that he did was actually running that as well.

11:33

And it's sober administration.

11:35

Yes, exactly.

11:36

That's what makes it almost more horrific in some ways as well.

11:38

It's just.

11:40

And that's what I found really interesting with this project is having those two different figures representing very different, the same, but different elements of this.

11:51

Yeah, I think where there's control not just over what is interpreted, but how it is interpreted, I don't know, not allowing the justice that we hope to bring to people to whom the justice belongs, you know, so it doesn't belong to the people who created this,

12:11

well, I'll say a law this, you know, it, it actually belongs to the people for whom looking at those statues is repugnant, frankly.

12:22

What will you take away from this project, one of the first of its kind under the new guidance?

12:28

I think what I'll take away from the project is some wonderful memories about collaborating with the steering group.

12:35

It has been really a really challenging process I think for all of us, but it's been wonderful to be able to come together, challenge each other's practice, question, debate, innovate and be creative together and also support each other when we've needed to.

12:53

The importance of working with a lead on the project such as Liz, who has really championed this project, who really truly and authentically believes in what we've been trying to do and has championed this internally in a way that we haven't been able to. As someone that's actually working internal to the organisation,

13:18

the learning has been how challenging this work can be, what the restrictions can be around that, some of the barriers as well.

13:27

I think learning from the project team again on how I can have some of those discussions bring some of those external influences in to make change internally.

13:37

And I think that's what we're making steps to that. If you're going to embark on a project like this, how important it is to understand how much time a project like this takes.

13:51

If, you know, something like this is about change, it's about transformation, which means it is about disrupting processes and systems that have been in place for a long time and don't serve those purposes of that that change.

14:05

Having to revisit these crimes and atrocities.

14:10

And it was in particular actually with Beckford where his plantations were.

14:16

Really what you need to know more about is how people like him were enabled and rather than the atrocities that he committed in Jamaica.

14:28

That was the most challenging thing.

14:29

One of the things I will be taking away from this project is actually the kinship that I built with the steering group and the project team, which I think is really special.

14:40

I could not have done the project without them.

14:43

I don't think I could have survived the project without them.

14:46

As part of the City of London's commitment to tackling racism in all forms, Chris Haywood, Policy and Resources Chair, has said there has been ongoing reflection and recognition to ensure people from all backgrounds feel safe and welcome in a modern, inclusive and forward-looking City.

15:06

What next for the City of London, which has committed to interrogating the horrific misdeeds of these two men, lauded as heroes and philanthropists for hundreds of years?

15:18

Are they really ready to change not only the narrative and all that goes with it, but what it means to address the history of the city and its involvement in the enslavement of Africans?

15:32

In a strange way it emphasises the power of people that should not be remembered in the way that these projects, these reinterpretation projects that actually do in the end is we inscribe the power of these memorials, rather than question why somebody who has done these things in the past should be memorialised in that way.

15:58

And I think that it, in the end, will encourage more demands for the removal of these statues.

16:06

It's going to be counterproductive

16:08

I think. If the City of London Corporation truly wants to dismantle racism in all its forms, in all of its spaces, then it needs to understand how important it is that this space, the

centre of the City of London Corporation, must adapt and must change,

16:29

not only in the way that it is utilised, but also in the visual storytelling that it upholds, that it maintains and that it preserves.

16:39

This is a very, very small step in the start of a journey.

16:44

The City of London Corporation has huge opportunity here to reflect and remember the stories that in the past it has worked so hard to erase and forget.

17:00

What I'm really hoping this project will be the catalyst for is for the City of London to undergo a thorough review of the statuary in the public realm here.

17:14

Whilst we have for this project being tasked with focusing on Beckford and Cass, they are by no means the only statues that could do with some further investigations and further contextualisation.

17:28

I think that the City of London needs to fess up much more clearly about how the wealth of this tiny part of London, let alone country, the extraordinary wealth that was brought in

from the empire, but also from the enslavement of people from Africa.

17:54

Now I'm aware that a new museum is being constructed at Smithfield.

18:01

The Museum of London is moving to Smithfield, and I think that's the place where they must really describe this history.

18:11

We have now a template and we now have literally a template.

18:16

So these are plaques that you can design and have in that space that have passed all of the, you know, rules and regulations that you need to go through with planning.

18:27

So you could you could extend that to other statues now.

18:31

Has power really shifted?

18:34

What has this project really achieved and brought to the City of London?

18:39

This is a tiny piece of work that really represents the start of a very long journey in dismantling the very curated, very Eurocentric stories that it has always told in this space.

18:57

I think what we'll take away from this project is an experience of the Retain and Explain policy and what it really means in practice.

19:08

It's not just about retaining the physical heritage itself, but there's a retention of the interpretation as well by the heritage custodians.

19:19

To whom does history belong?

19:20

Not just to whom does heritage belong?

19:23

I'd like them to review their public statutory using independent steering groups that are not chosen necessarily by the powers that be here, but are brought in from different walks of life as we were with expertise outside of the City of London sphere.

19:45

What we've also learnt is that the demand for removal or

relocation of contested statues, it's just as potent as it was before.

19:58

And I don't think Retain and Explain is going to diminish that demand.

20:03

In fact, I think it could possibly intensify it.

20:07

The glaringly the obvious point is the statue itself is still there,

20:13

and why that's significant is because each time I've come,

20:19

and each time, of course, I've read more, I've read I've delve into the history of Beckford and Cass,

20:25

you'd have to for this project.

20:29

Just looking at him disgusts me.

20:36

And you know, his physicality.

20:39

I'm talking about Beckford in particular, you know, the size of him in that space, looking down on everybody,

20:46

you know, you have to look up for him.

20:50

The statues are still there, and they exude a kind of power.

20:57

It doesn't matter what you put there in terms of interpretation.

21:00

The City of London talks about being, you know, against racism in all its forms.

21:06

But if the statue is still there and a lot of the other statues are still there, then that has not been adequately addressed.

21:18

Let us not forget who this project is really about.

21:22

For all of us.

21:23

This is about bringing a semblance of justice into this space for

the hundreds and thousands of unseen African people who were violently enslaved and oppressed to create the wealth of these two men and many others, and the City of London itself.

21:40

Our contribution to this project and the creation of this video are in recognition of them.