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Dragging The Main: Public Art, Memory and Race On A Downtown Street

EDGARDO CERVANO-SOTO

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MICHAEL KAHAN
URBAN STUDIES
ABSTRACT

Numerous cities have utilized their heritage in the form of public art to reinvigorate the image, identity, and commercial appeal of their downtown. The city of Richmond in Northern California is one of the latest to include public art within a larger revitalization effort on its principal downtown street, Macdonald Avenue. In 2009, following a community-collaborative process, the Richmond Community Redevelopment Agency implemented five historical interpretive markers and plaques along Macdonald Avenue. In addition to recounting Richmond history, the public art addresses racial discord and memorializes immigration and diversity as welcoming facets in building community. Through the visual analysis of the public art, this essay examines the problematic nature of public art as a viable way to foster race relations and yet encourage economic revitalization through the sanitization of race in historical public art and collective memory.
DRAGGING THE MAIN: Public Art, Memory and Race on a Downtown Street

INTRODUCTION

On the eastern side of the San Francisco Bay is the city of Richmond. Known as the Purple Heart City for its participation in ship-building during World War II, Richmond experienced great upheaval in addressing the social, economic, and racial implications brought on by the home front effort. Facing a lack of infrastructure, insufficient housing, and a swollen population of over 100,000 by the end of the war, Richmond’s governing board enacted multiple policies in hopes of restoring order to the city that had spun out of control. However, these policies were a reaction towards the largely African-American and ethnic migrants who were seen as the reason for Richmond’s unraveling. Although named a model “All-American City” by the National Civic League in 1954, the consequence and memory of Richmond’s racist past and socio-economic disparities has largely defined the city’s image and identity well into the 2000’s.

Macdonald Avenue, defined as the principal street of Richmond since the early 1900’s, has served as the city’s barometer, visually reflecting the city’s trajectory. The avenue possesses an eclectic mix of the past and present. A few surviving historical brick buildings from the early 20th century are scattered throughout the avenue. On the avenue’s northern fringe, war housing and industrial warehouses are testimony to the war era. A shopping center from the 1980’s provides the only grocery store for downtown’s neighborhoods.

The West Macdonald Avenue Streetscape Improvement Project, completed in 2009 by the Richmond Community Redevelopment Agency, provides the most visible sight of downtown improvement. The project not only included street repairs and sidewalk furniture but also the addition of historical interpretative markers—titles the Macdonald Avenue Landmarks, these
bronze-engraved street plaques recount the many individual and collective experiences of Richmond residents of World War II as they happened on Macdonald Avenue.

What emerges out of the public art is not only a narrative to further historicize downtown Macdonald Avenue, but the presentation of multiple sub-narratives. The sub-narratives function to unify and strengthen the community through the celebration of diversity, cultural contributions, tradition of the arts, and civil rights activism. However, in retelling the progress of Richmond, the landmarks gloss over the complex relationships and tensions of race and immigrant status in order to advertise a culturally rich city. Instead of addressing the discrimination and disparities faced by racial and immigrant minorities, the landmarks insist on fulfilling and continuing the moral values cultivated in the face of discrimination to lead Richmond towards revitalization. The narratives within the Macdonald Avenue landmarks and street plaques attempt to unify and foster community empathy through a shared immigrant narrative, but fail to confront the racism that has so clearly demarcated the city.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINS

As teenagers, my sisters and I were often discouraged by our parents from going anywhere near west Macdonald Avenue from 1st to 16th street. Throughout my life, Macdonald Avenue has been defined by its blight, lack of infrastructure, and violence. Compared to the photographs and stories of the 1950’s that I saw and read beside the library shelves, the current-day Macdonald Avenue seemed drained of life and history. Gone were the movie theaters, the crowded streets and cars “dragging the main”— an activity Richmond youth partook in cruising and parading their cars down Macdonald Avenue in the late hours. Instead, in their place were lone streets and the empty shells of buildings, boarded by planks and surrounded by high brush.

Macdonald Avenue resembled a wasteland, and it fascinated me. There was something in its dreary and crumbling aesthetic that felt dream-like, as if time stopped, history moved on, and
the street had descended into its own black hole in space. Being a cineaste at an early age, I thought of Macdonald Ave as the perfect background for a film shooting. I mentally projected film images onto street, many having no connection to Richmond, created only by imagination. Within Macdonald Avenue, I envisioned the abandoned cityscape in *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*, the cruel outlaw western towns in *John Wayne* films; the American teenage rebellion, jukebox diners and American 50’s pop in *Zoot Suit*, *The Last Picture Show*, and *Grease*. I imagined the boarded movie theaters re-opening, lighting the downtown with neon lights like in *Sweet Smell of Success*. I felt the brick buildings, and the kinetic, simmering energy of *Do The Right Thing*. Macdonald Avenue was a magical space precisely because of its lack of historical interpretation.

My parents’ reason for discouraging any visit to Macdonald Avenue stemmed from its reputation as a violent, poor, and black neighborhood. Race stigmatized downtown. My own work in local community organizations confirmed the racial divide between Latinos and African-Americans on a wider scale. In one instance, while at a non-profit, I conducted surveys with the Latino population of Richmond, asking immigrant parents if they would attend meetings or purchase groceries from a community garden on Macdonald Avenue. The majority of parents responded no, saying “it’s not safe” and “they live there.” The “they” parents referred to is the African-American population living close to Macdonald Avenue, in the Iron Triangle neighborhood.

The current influx of Latino and Southeast Asian immigrants into Richmond, the second generation children and their relationship with longtime Richmond residents, has exposed a dynamic integral to the study of immigrant incorporation, race, identity, memory, and citizenship. My reason for writing this paper is to not only probe how history and race are negotiated to unify a diverse community, but also to ask what a city branded by nostalgia will
produce in the future? What room is there left for current residents, from all racial, ethnic, class, and immigrant backgrounds, to develop their own image of their identity in the city of Richmond?

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Numerous cities have utilized their heritage to reinvigorate the image, identity, and commercial appeal of their downtown. According to Isenberg, heritage-centered redevelopment emerged near the end of the 20th century in response to luring commercial activity and white suburbanites back into the city through the emphasis of historicized districts (Isenberg 2004). Moreover, historical districts preserve place identity, enhance physical design, increase tourist potential and, especially for small city downtowns, are economically sound and can improve the sense of belonging a resident has to the community (Hodder 1999, Robertson 2001). However, M. Christine Boyer criticizes heritage-centered redevelopment for how it recycles history and capitalizes on the positive nostalgia emitted by the pastiche of historical buildings, signs, and landscapes (Boyer 1994). In the science fiction film genre, film scholar Vivian Sobchack writes on the cinematic city as embodying poetic images or narratives that are present in real cities (Sobchack 1988). Among these narratives is junkyard futurism. Seen most prominently in Blade Runner, the cities of junkyard futurism are comprised of multiple items, buildings, and infrastructures that have been accumulated to exhaust its material production until it exhausts itself and is then recycled into a newer model of economic investment.

In his case study on Old Downtown Pasadena, Greg Dickerson argues that historicized spaces, driven by commercially invigorated nostalgia, re-formulate individual identity in relation to space. As a result, collective and individual identity is informed by the conglomeration of past narratives. These narratives are authenticated by the individual and accepted into memory (Dickerson 1997). Boyer argues that it’s precisely the fragmentation of buildings, the
commercial preservation and mythical nostalgia that indoctrinates a specific public memory and disables residents from cultivating their own independent sense of present history. (Boyer 1994)

Meanwhile, the literature on public art has shown that in today’s age, public art has reached a level where it functions on a platform of symbolism and public good, in terms of developing civic identity and sense of community (Hall and Robertson in McCarthy 2006). Public art can encourage diversity and the inclusion of marginalized spaces significant to the history of the disenfranchised (Hayden 1995). Hayden writes that the recognition of cultural heritage in low-income neighborhoods through public art can then lead to additional community organizing movements focusing on improving social living conditions and reconstruct the meaning of their landscape (Hayden 1995). Public art can embody a democratic space and establish a discussion in which community is nurtured not through similarities, but through differences (Young 1990). Yet, public art as an economic initiative can be an instigator towards gentrification (Cameron and Coaffee 2005). Furthermore, public art focused on heritage can also be utilized to re-write the narrative of a city for its own sake, instead of honoring the history (Hodder 1999). Essentially, public art can erase, re-enforce, or create a new narrative for which community members will accept, identify, or resist.

**METHODOLOGY**

The research and data for this project consisted of analyzing the public art commissioned for Macdonald Avenue by the Richmond Community Redevelopment Agency. These works of public art were studied in their location. Photographs of the landmarks and plaques were then taken for further analysis. When I studied the art works in their location, I began at the first marker. Succeeding historical markers were reviewed chronologically, as I walked along the northern side of Macdonald Avenue.
DATA ANALYSIS

On the summer afternoon of July 22, 2009, Richmond city officials and residents celebrated the “Grand Re-Opening of Macdonald Avenue” on a vacant lot beside the Richmond Transit Village on 15th Street. The ribbon cutting ceremony was followed by a presentation of awards to long-time business owners and the revelation of the five Macdonald Avenue Landmarks and multiple bronze-engraved plaques recently installed along the avenue from 15th Street to Harbour Way (10th Street).¹ The re-opening celebration resulted out of the completion of an endeavor titled the West Macdonald Avenue Streetscape Improvements Project (WMASIP) from the Richmond Community Redevelopment Agency (RCRA). The WMASIP is actually just one component from a larger effort, the Macdonald Avenue Economic Revitalization Program (MAERP). The MAERP is an ambitious and fairly recent plan. The overall objective of MAERP is to revitalize 52 blocks of Macdonald Avenue. Macdonald Avenue is regarded as Richmond’s main street, and a large historical and commercial corridor.

Figure 1: West Macdonald Streetscape Improvement Project

Relevant to this study is the Historical Downtown Celebration. In this first phase of the WMASIP, the emphasis was on the downtown corridor from Harbour Way (10th Street) to 15th Street. The streetscape improvements for the corridor primarily consisted of installing new street

² Harbour Way/Macdonald Avenue Master Development PPT Presentation, #1. RCRA
lights, planting trees, the addition of street furniture such as benches and decorative bus stops, and finally, the inclusion of public art. For the creation of Macdonald Avenue’s public art, the RCRA commissioned a team of inter-disciplinary professionals in the fields of history, photography, design, and sculpture. Project director and historian Donna Graves, also the former executive of UCLA’s The Power of Place organization, led the project. She collaborated with writer Chiori Santiago, Richmond-based photographer Lewis Watts, and design firm Mayer-Reed. As part of a 6-month long collaborative effort, the design team implemented “Memories of Macdonald,” a series of community meetings and events to cultivate images, stories, and quotes for the landmarks. Once memories and archival materials were gathered, the designs for the public art were sculpted, finalized, and installed by the Scientific Art Studio in Richmond.

Macdonald Avenue Landmarks Description

Beginning at the Richmond Transit Village and ending on Harbour Way, the five Macdonald Avenue Landmarks and bronze-engraved plaques are interspersed in between the blocks. With the exception of the first landmark, all the landmarks are situated on the sidewalk very near the corner of intersections, a couple of feet away from the traffic and pedestrian lights. Standing at 5’8”, the landmarks are sculptures of smooth concrete. Circular at the base level and opening like a fan towards the top, the concrete marker is thin but sturdy. As the face of the concrete marker is wider, 21 inches, a printed illustration in the shape of an elongated pentagon and a curved top is laminated on metal, which has been sculpted into the concrete post.

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3 Macdonald Avenue Streetscape Improvements. Community Meeting, Redevelopment Agency-June 2008
In addition to the Macdonald Landmarks, multiple bronze-engraved plaques were installed beside the landmarks onto the ground. On each site of the landmark there are four bronze plaques. The plaques are identical in size, 26” x 14”, and similar in design. In the group of four, three of the plaques contain an engraved quote from a Richmond resident inscribed in a half circle. An arrow, labeled Richmond, is on the outside of the half circle and points towards the quotation from the top right corner. Slanted besides the half-circle on the bottom right hand corner is the name to whom the quotation belongs. The fourth plaque in the group is the only one that repeats on every site. This street plaque illustrates a magnified representation of the San Pablo Bay. Nearby towns, such as Berkeley, Vallejo, and El Cerrito are labeled, but Richmond is inscribed within a circle and indicated by an arrow.

As the only street plaque that repeats, the depiction offers a geographical sense of Richmond. Partnered with the Macdonald Landmarks, this plaque operates as a
The compass depiction can also be interpreted as placing emphasis on Richmond’s significant role in shipbuilding along with other industrial towns during the war decade.

“Welcome to Richmond”: War Migration and the Immigrant Narrative

As one exits the Richmond BART Station towards Macdonald Avenue, the significance of honoring and remembering the past is clearly evident. At the sub-level on a wall beside the concrete staircase that leads to the street is a series of three murals presenting Richmond’s Spanish California history, World War II experience, and post-war aspirations. At the top of the concrete staircase, positioned in a small plaza serving as a transitory space to the Richmond Transit Village, is the first Macdonald Avenue Landmark, titled “Welcome to Richmond.”

Serving as the starting point for the memory walk down Macdonald Avenue, the “Welcome to Richmond” landmark appropriately introduces Richmond as a significant point of destination through its images and text. The top photograph depicts a massive shift change at the Kaiser shipyards, while the secondary imagery is of a black family leaning on cars waiting at the Southern Pacific Railroad Station in 1950. The first paragraph of the text describes a scene of arrivals and departures during the early migration of the 1900’s and World War II. The following paragraph changes the time period to the post-war era, explaining that many migrant workers decided to make Richmond their home instead of returning. The last paragraph moves away from the home front context and relates to the present time. This third paragraph explains Richmond as being a gateway for many immigrants. In this case, Mexican, Central Americans, and Southeast Asians are recognized as major populations that call Richmond home.
Here, the introduction of Richmond as a point of destination in the migration of World War II workers and contemporary immigrants is the first attempt to relate both experiences. The public art work accomplishes this narrative through various visual techniques within the landmark and also in its location. First, the imagery in the landmark interacts with its physical surroundings on a metaphysical level. In the landmark, the Southern Pacific Railroad station is referenced as an immigrant gateway greeting newcomers. The imagery imagined here is the arrival of migrants and immigrants marveling at Richmond. In reality, the present-day BART station serves to mimic that migration experience. By coming off of the BART train and ascending the stairways towards the streets of Richmond, current-day visitors and residents are unknowingly participating in the re-enactment of this migration story. Once one reaches the street level, the nautical design of the Richmond BART station and the content of the bronze-engraved street plaques enforce the arrival narrative. Facing Macdonald Avenue, the Richmond BART Station incorporates structural elements of ships. A wide, red exhume tube begins at the base of the concrete stairway and continues upward, passing the street level and jutting out into the sky. A large oval white roof expands over the street level area. The BART station’s nautical design is similar to a liberty ship. The presence of the liberty ship represents an earlier form of international migration.

Within the street plaques, the nautical theme is present through the use of the “compass” and “we make history” street plaque. The “compass” operates as a symbolic bearing. Although
“we make history” lacks any nautical influence in its content, the presentation of multiple languages comments on the method by which Richmond attempts to memorialize itself as an immigrant gateway. By having this street plaque built in within the immigrant narrative of “Welcome to Richmond,” the city has solidified the significance of all immigrant populations, as every group is responsible for contributing to Richmond history and culture.

Next, within the landmark, the immigrant narrative is visually built by its use of photographs. Although the top photograph portrays a shift change at the Kaiser shipyards, within the context of migration, the photograph doubles as an image of new immigrants waiting at an entrance station. The imagery of sprawling lines and mobs is similar to photographs of Ellis Island and mass waves of immigration that we have come to associate with the immigrant experience. Instead of choosing a photograph that clearly depicts working on the shipyard, the artists are insisting on the creation of an immigrant narrative. To aid the arriving imagery of immigrants into Richmond, one street plaque recounts a resident’s experience of the family migrating to California during the war in phases. The plaque expresses that the mother and her children boarded the train, wearing only their clothes, and left to be re-united with their father at the Richmond station. The plaque’s narrative of the journey is only one of the many migration stories.

Furthermore, the text of the narrative moves to emphasize the immigrant narrative’s concept of the American Dream. The American Dream refers to an immigrant’s hope for a better life and the sacrifice involved to fulfill the promise. The text contains many key significant phrases that commemorate the American Dream. In the text, World War II Richmond is defined as the place where the American Dream can be achieved. Phrases such as “... newcomers seeking the economic fruits of war time...” (paragraph 1), “Families, neighbors and co-workers spread the word that you could reach your dream here...” (paragraph 2), and “arrive at
Richmond’s doorstep seeking a new life” (paragraph 3) idolize Richmond as the immigrant gateway and a land capable of providing upward mobility. However, in the second paragraph, the text makes it clear that for many migrants the closing of industries during the post-war era threatened the achievement of the American Dream.

“...post-war years turned dreams into challenges. Nearly all the housing built for ‘temporary’ workers was demolished and jobs were hard to find. Yet for most, Richmond was now home and there was no going back.”

The quotes refer to two aspects significant in the immigrant narrative: exclusion and the creation of home. This quote demonstrates the exclusion many newcomers felt when migrating to California during World War II. Newcomers lived in Richmond but were considered to be “temporary” workers, therefore temporary residents. The labeling of “temporary” shows the degree of exclusion newcomers felt while in Richmond. In addition, the quote also acknowledges, although safely, that jobs for migrants and immigrants were limited due to their status as outsiders. The conflict of succeeding financially and being limited by the policies and “newcomer” status is a significant tension in the American Dream. However, despite the exclusionary practices and difficulties, newcomers created Richmond as their home. Here, the quote augments the immigrant narrative experience as comprised by conflict. Within the immigrant narrative, challenges must be endured in order to have a chance of fulfilling the American dream.

The last paragraph applies the challenges experienced by World War II migrants to the experience of contemporary Latino and Southeast Asian immigrants. There is a parallelism that attempts to relate both experiences in order to achieve understanding between current long-time residents and immigrants. By identifying Richmond as an immigrant gateway that continues to provide opportunities throughout generations, the public art is able to present a community unified through its shared experience of aspirations and challenges. Furthermore, the “Welcome
to Richmond” landmark depicts inclusion by showcasing a photograph of Mexican folk dance. The text of the landmark celebrates Richmond’s immigrant narrative because it has led to a vibrant and enhanced cultural mix. Yet, the addition of a quote from a younger generation implies the greater aspiration Richmond wishes to achieve. In this quote, a grandchild talks about the United States as being a place where everything is provided. However, the grandchild undermines the significance of material possessions.

‘Before my grandpa died, he used to talk about a place where there is a lot of happiness and everyone has enough to eat and a house to live in. I think my grandpa was talking about the United States, but I’m not sure. To me, he is talking about what a democracy should be.”

Here, the grandchild holds democracy and obtaining justice to a higher significance. Richmond’s inclusion of this quote, given by the child of Southeast Asian immigrants, demonstrates Richmond’s desire to move beyond its immigrant narrative. Richmond aspires to reach the level of true democracy where all have a voice, regardless of immigrant status. The landmark concludes with a hopeful quality, presenting a Richmond that wishes to evolve into a multi-faceted but equally just community. By having the transit station as the starting location of the Macdonald Avenue Landmarks, Richmond is able to capitalize on its immigrant roots and re-imagine their progress as a succession of generations that share a common destiny.

“What Happened Here”: Race and Downtown Decline

Outside of the BART station and Transit Village, at the intersection of Macdonald Avenue and Marina Way (14th Street), is the second landmark, titled “What Happened Here?” Positioned across from a small shopping center, the second landmark tells the narrative of Macdonald Avenue’s decline and its present emergence. The celebratory immigrant narrative that started in “Welcome to Richmond” is abruptly halted. Compared to the rest of landmarks and street plaques, “What Happened Here?” inhabits a duality that seeks to acknowledge racial
tension and widespread discrimination but is conflicted on whether that historical depiction would cement a history that does not fit within the city’s desire for re-invention.

The principal photograph on the landmark presents Macdonald Avenue at night in 1959. The bright neon and street lights characterize downtown as a lively center, very contradictory to the sorrowful tales of Richmond residents lamenting the loss of its industrial sector after the war. The superimposed quote on the photograph captures the optimism of Richmond after the end of the war: “Macdonald Avenue...improved after the war. Richmond was growing by leaps and bounds. Everything just seemed to be progressing, prosperous.” Interestingly, this quote runs counter to the history given by the text. In the first paragraph, Martin Luther King’s assassination, the civil rights protests, and the shooting of an African-American youth by the Richmond police are seen as intensifying the tensions that resulted in the burning of a local furniture store in 1968. The accompanying secondary photograph is an archival newspaper clipping titled “A Nowhere Town: Police, Residents Trying to Cool Down Richmond.” The image is of an African-American woman facing two white Richmond police officials. The second paragraph speaks to Macdonald Avenue’s decline as following the greater narrative of urban decay recurring throughout the nation. The last paragraph finalizes Macdonald Avenue’s decline from commercial center. It cites the opening of Hilltop Mall as the factor that attracted all commercial appeal from downtown.

However, in the last sentence and in its bottom photograph, “What Happened Here?” memorializes the current re-awakening of Macdonald Avenue. The landmark self-historicizes itself, since the inaugural ribbon cutting ceremony of the Transit Village is depicted as initiating downtown’s re-emergence. Meanwhile, the street plaques detail further migration and post-war experiences. They tell stories of leaving friends and family for California, newcomers attracting
attention newcomers for being seen as entitled, and last, the story of a store remaining open even though many stores closed after the riots.

**Figure 7: “What Happened Here?”**

*Author’s photograph, September 2010*

Marina Way (14th Street) & Macdonald Ave.

Landmark A. ‘Newcomer” B. “Collectivist

“What Happened Here?” is a problematic landmark. The conflict arises when the racial history of Richmond does not fit into the positive narrative the RCRA wants to redefine for Macdonald Avenue. The full revelation of racism as being one of the most important factors that led to Macdonald Avenue’s decline poses a risk in further stigmatizing Macdonald Avenue as a site of racial tension. As a result, the role of racism is lessened but the moral values created in the face of discrimination are celebrated as the values that will lift Richmond into future success.

The recognition of racial tensions is acknowledged in the first paragraph of the text. Here, the narrative of the burned furniture store and the context of national civil rights movement symbolize the degree to which racial tensions significantly affected the city. By linking its local frustrations to national racism, Richmond establishes itself in the narrative of racially conflicted cities throughout the United States by the end of the 1960’s. Plus, the inclusion of a racially-charged killing of an African-American youth by Richmond Police demonstrates that there is a consciousness to remember the racism that prevailed in Richmond. However, while this admission of racial tension is historically accurate, the admission of the event also serves to teach
civic values. The consciousness surrounding race or “newcomer status” is expressed in the following street plaque.

“Newcomers called attention to what we were denied... They felt this was the land of milk and honey, and they were going to get some because they never had anything anyway.” (A.)

Here, newcomers are singled out for their migrant status and effort to achieve the American Dream. In her book, To Place Our Deeds, historian Shirley Ann Moore writes of newcomers being targeted for what was seen as arrogance by long-time residents. According to Moore, long-time residents were resentful towards the freedoms newcomers, especially southern African-Americans and ethnic minorities, were experiencing. Moore writes that while the freedoms and upward mobility gained by lower class migrants symbolized a threat to the status of long-time residents, the gains also proved to long-time black residents that the racial hierarchy did not have be the status quo. Newcomers became the target of discrimination and also motivated ethnic long-term Richmond residents to mobilize politically. The landmarks seem to begin to recognize the significance of race, but the development is immature.

When discussing the ultimate downfall of Macdonald Avenue, the landmarks are hesitant to place the racial stigmatization of Macdonald Avenue as a leading factor. Instead, the decline of Macdonald Avenue is normalized. The downtown’s fall is linked to the nation-wide narrative of urban decay. Race is not recognized for being a factor in influencing the economic policies and social occurrences such as urban renewal, white flight, and the opening of Hilltop Mall that initiated the fall of downtown. The refusal to clearly state race demonstrates the desire to redefine Macdonald Avenue’s history as far away from its racial history as possible in order to attract new investors.

On the other hand, while the landmark leaves out the negative experiences of discrimination, the values fostered against discrimination are saluted. In the third paragraph, the text states that community residents and activists refused to let Macdonald Avenue fall into
further blight. The current revitalization effort is presented as beginning from a grass roots movement, where the community took charge to create the difference. In race and ethnicity theory, collectivist orientation is the mode in which racialized groups respond against the limitations created by racism. Because of a racialized status, discriminated members are linked through their shared experience. In Richmond’s case, the landmarks highlight the communal aspect of collectivist orientation. The street plaques further this notion in their content. Speaking to the closing of stores on Main Street after the riots, the following quote demonstrates the power of a collectivist orientation in empowering a community.

“Most stores closed up, but I stayed open. My clients’ husbands kept watch over my store and we just conducted our business. They kept us going.” (B.)

The plaque shows that Richmond residents reacted in a collectivist orientation following the burning that resulted from the racial tensions. Residents continued to patronize and guard the shop. By memorializing collectivist orientation, the landmarks function on an informative level, teaching Richmond residents to maintain their values of brotherhood and communal support.

In addition to collectivist orientation, the landmarks emphasize resiliency and determination. Community residents and government officials are portrayed as the heroes of Macdonald Avenue. No matter how long or seriously Macdonald Avenue had been declining, the community remained steadfast in revitalizing downtown. The overall arch of this landmark is to acknowledge and offer amends to the racial history but with the careful touch to not exacerbate a history of racial tension that can overpower Macdonald Avenue’s new commercial-friendly narrative. The landmark also works to promote the values that sustained ethnic minorities and newcomers through persecution. While this landmark makes few references to the immigrant narrative defined in the first landmark, the narrative of collectivist orientation and resiliency can also be applied to the immigrant narrative. New immigrants also demonstrate a collectivist orientation because of their newcomer status. Although subtle, the parallel between World War
II migrants and contemporary immigrants is demonstrated by their shared reliance on collectivist orientation, determination, and resiliency.

Furthermore, the inclusion of a 2006 photograph depicting the ribbon cutting of the transit village on the bottom of the landmark demonstrates the beginnings of a new narrative: the narrative of revitalization. By self-archiving the moment, the RCRA has already defined the future narrative of Macdonald Avenue as successful. This is problematic because there is no allowance for a natural development of a new narrative for downtown cultivated by community residents. Instead, community residents, informed by the landmark that has already historicized the revitalization of downtown, must go along in believing the downtown is re-emerging. The landmark provides an image and narrative of the future and, because of the landmark’s status as “commissioned” and “official” art, the narrative of revitalization is difficult to deny. Psychologically, the landmarks are appealing to the emotions of Richmond residents and attempting to convince the public of downtown’s re-emergence.

**CONCLUSION**

The narratives presented by the Macdonald Avenue Landmarks and street plaques attempt to re-invent the identity of a city’s downtown defined by its racial tensions, violence, poverty, and inequality through the memorialization of its past. By remembering the past, the landmarks make clear that Richmond was once a thriving city built on the hard work and perseverance of its people. Such remembrance tries to inspire and challenge the current generation to help their city rise to the level of greatness it once had. In the analysis of the public art’s theme, we have seen how the landmarks celebrate the city’s immigrant narrative, the tradition of music and performing arts, and the strong values of resiliency and determination involved in the fight for civil rights. It has also been demonstrated that the public art recognizes the importance of acknowledging the racial history of Richmond that has and continues to affect
the city. Through these narratives, the landmarks have presented a Richmond bent on strengthening the community and fostering understanding between people by displaying a parallel link between the migrant generation of World War II and contemporary immigrants.

However, the landmarks are also responsible for not depicting the history of racism in its actuality. The public art is hesitant to reveal any further racial history because such revelation and remembrance conflicts with the new narrative of Macdonald Avenue as a re-invented street. To address race critically is risking that Macdonald Avenue would once again be historicized as a street stigmatized by race, thereby intimidating investors. Further racial history and stories are oppressed in order to allow the re-creation of downtown’s commercial appeal.

In addition, the city utilizes its immigrant narrative to advertise its diverse and culturally rich city. By commemorating the cultural capital that newcomers, including recent immigrants, have brought throughout the years, the city is establishing Macdonald Avenue as a lively arts and culture district. Here, ethnicity and race are recognized for their cultural capital, but not for the experience that encompasses inequality, exclusion, and discrimination. In fact, while the landmarks and street plaques have established Richmond as a city that feels enhanced by its diversity, it fails to incorporate those populations. The landmarks and street plaques are all in English, speak only to the past, and do not include any quote or testimony in a language other than English. The landmarks are utilizing multi-culturalism but practicing exclusion. Although the Macdonald Avenue landmarks and street plaques are informing residents about Richmond history and giving a sense of belonging, the narratives are also functioning in a way that defines the city’s trajectory and significance for them.

In a 2006 interview for the San Francisco Chronicle, Betty Reid Soskin, a long-time Richmond resident and shipyard worker, said the Memories on Macdonald and public art project “gives roots to a city that’s been without roots for the past 62 years.” Soskin later added that the
proposed projects would do good for Richmond residents because “there is a hunger for history” in the community. Commissioned by the Richmond Community Redevelopment Agency, the Macdonald Avenue Landmarks and street plaques are fulfilling this hunger and much more. Their offering goes beyond planting roots to a city, beyond showing archival photographs and presenting historical narratives of a Richmond alien to many of the city’s immigrant and youth generations. Instead, the public art on Macdonald Avenue offers an origin story. Within this origin story there are facts, yes, but there are also myths, visions that we desire were real again, values that we aspire to live by, and hopes we want to grasp.

This version of “Dragging the Main: Public Art, Memory and Race and a Downtown Street” has been edited for length from a longer, original senior research paper.

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