CONTESTING STORIES: EXPLORING PUBLIC ART AS A FRAMEWORK FOR EQUITY IN PUEBLO, COLORADO

PURPOSE

Monuments rocketed into public discourse during the 'national reckoning on race' after the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. Across the country, 94 different monuments to Confederate leaders and other controversial historical figures were taken down.[1] The unprecedented wave of removals was reported as a new phenomenon in media on the left and right alike, with some declaring: 'it's open season on statues'.[2]

But monuments have always been the subject of contestation as societies grapple with how history is interpreted and by whom.[3] In Pueblo, Colorado, the fight over a Christopher Columbus monument has been going on for over twenty years.[4] Tension breaks out every year on Columbus Day, where protesters and Italian organizers go head-to-head. The city is unwilling to remove the monument, and activists are unwilling to let the history of subjugation live on. The monument sits in the middle of a deadlock: a symbol of pride, power, and oppression.

Conflict over Pueblo's Columbus monument is a symptom of greater anger towards city-sanctioned narratives of cultural identity. These narratives are upheld in many facets of city life, but are most immediately obvious in Pueblo's public art with the publicity of the protests. Public art is particularly effective at transmitting cultural stories that are highly politicized yet lack context, creating a sense of place that may not represent its people. This study interrogates disconnection between the city's narratives of cultural identity and the residents' lived experiences using a lens of equity. Three main questions are explored: 1) What are the dominant narratives told by Pueblo's public art? 2) How can Pueblo's public art system be equitable? and 3) What might Pueblo's equitable public art system look like in practice?

[1] "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy." Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021.

[2] O'Reilly. "Confederate statues aren't the only monuments people want torn down". Fox News, 2017.

[3] "Monuments: Commemoration and Controversy". An exhibit from the New York Historical Society.

[4] Willard. "Pueblo's Columbus statue site of further protests as community members seek its removal." The Pueblo Chieftan, 2021.

BACKGROUND

> “A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A **borderland** is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.”
>
> — Gloria E. Anzaldúa[5]

Pueblo, Colorado has aways been a borderland, situated in limbo between contested cultural identities and ownership. Originally home to the overlapping Ute, Apache, and Cheyenne Nations, the land became the colonized territory of Spain before declaring independence as Mexico.[6] As a developing town on Mexico’s border, Pueblo was handed over to the United States when the border moved further south after the Mexican-American war. Although Pueblo’s ownership passed between governments, its people remained deeply connected to the land, echoing the refrain: “we did not cross the border; the border crossed us”.[7]

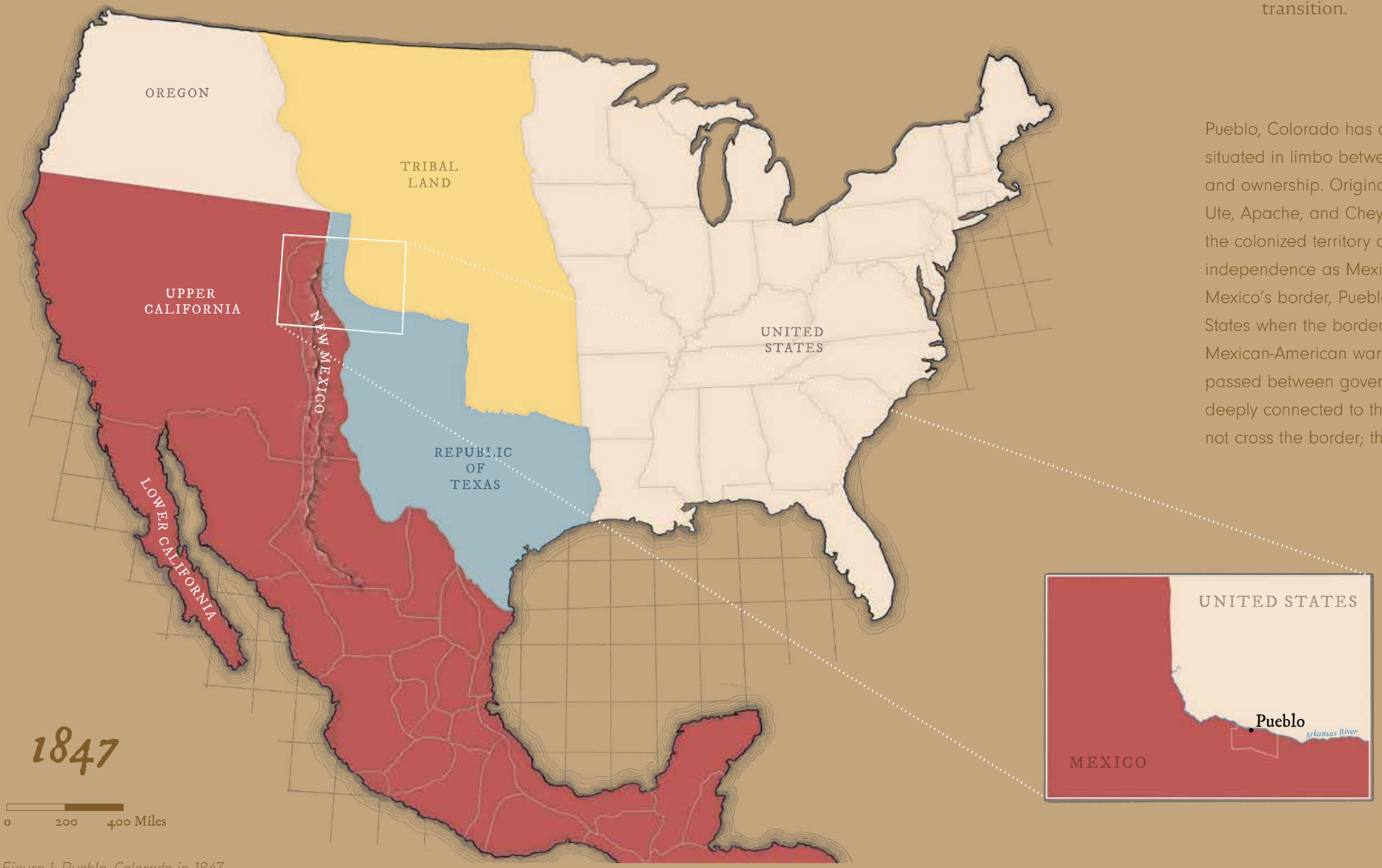
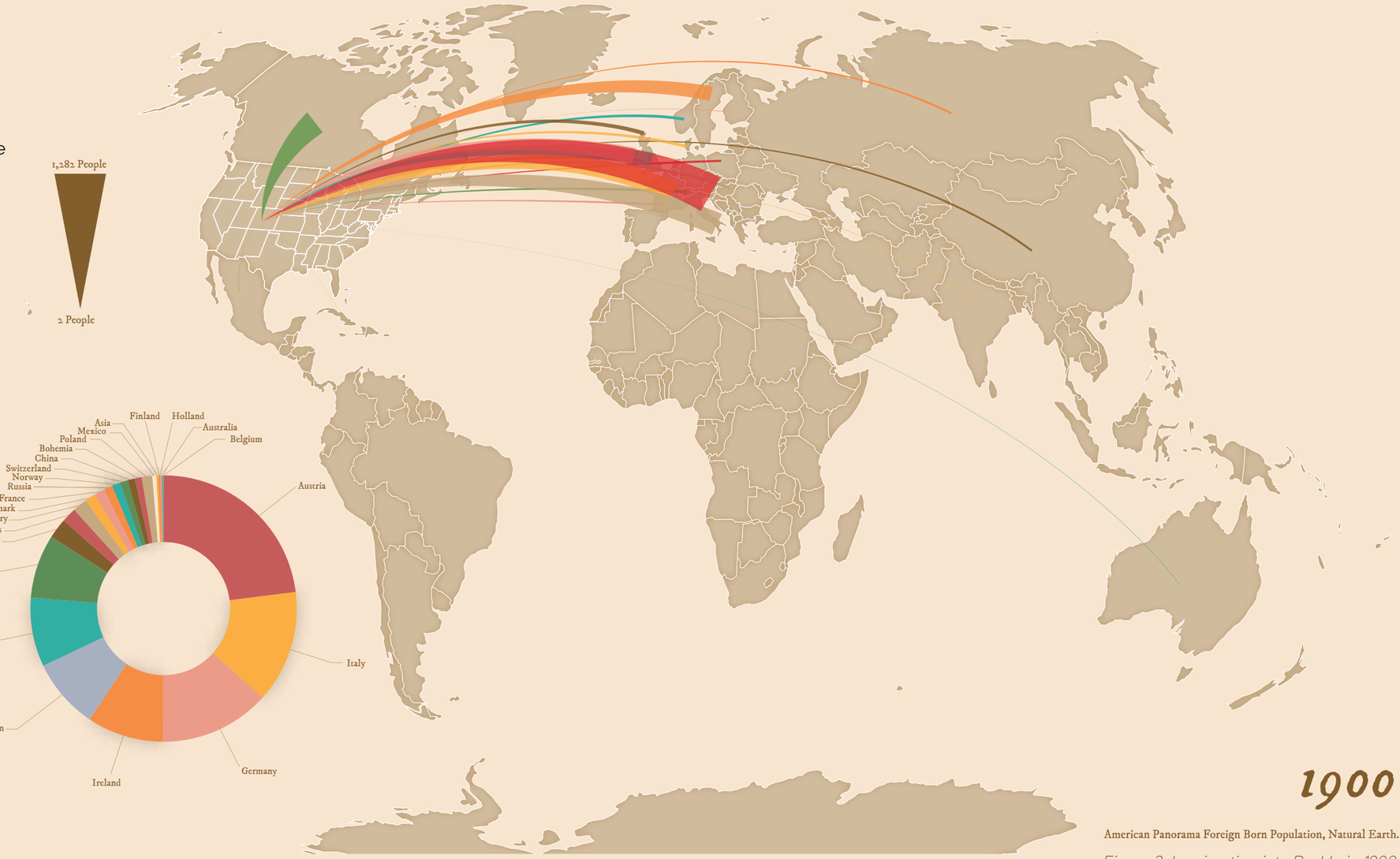


Figure 1: Pueblo, Colorado in 1847.

[5] Anzaldúa. Borderlands/La Frontera, 1987: 3.
[6] Library of Congress, 2021. “Today in History- August 1.”
[7] History Colorado, 2021. “Borderlands of Southern Colorado” exhibit.
Data from Doolittle & Munson

As white settlers began to occupy Pueblo, it developed into a booming steel town and attracted more Italian immigrants per capita than anywhere else in the United States.[8] Many immigrants faced ethnic and religious discrimination from residents who blamed them for economic hardships. Immigrants often changed their names to be less Italian-sounding in order to find employment at Pueblo's steel mill, and were frequently targeted by the Ku Klux Klan.[8] In 1892, eleven Italian immigrants were lynched in New Orleans, leading to a national observance of Columbus Day to preserve diplomatic standing with Italy.[9] Colorado was the first state to recognize Columbus day as an official holiday, forever transforming Columbus into a symbol of Italian pride.[8] Pueblo's monument to Columbus was erected soon after, becoming a beacon of social mobility and power for Italian immigrants, and an act of violence to indigenous and Chicano communities.

> "[T]he monument provided a vehicle through which they **inserted themselves into discourses** pertaining to the founding of the American nation and countered nativist rhetoric."
>
> — Marianna Gato[8]



1900

American Panorama Foreign Born Population, Natural Earth.

Figure 2: Immigration into Pueblo in 1900.

[8] Gatto, 2022. "An Unknown 'Father of Columbus Day' and the Colorado City Embroiled in One of the Most Intense Standoffs Surrounding Its Columbus Monument." Italian Sons and Daughters of America.

[9] Schafer, 2021. "The First Columbus Day Was Born of Violence - and Political Calculation". The Washington Post.

Protests over the Columbus statue are focused on the monument's removal, but are also reflective of deep-rooted issues of cultural erasure in public space. This becomes particularly evident in Pueblo's wider public art system. Using Chantel Mouffe's conception, public art is understood not as art that exists within public space, but art that establishes public space through action.[10] Here, public space follows Jurgen Habermas's description of the public sphere; not as a spatial concept or a body of people, but as a processual, performative arrangement where the public produces and reproduces itself through politicized acts of cultural exchange.[11] When art becomes public, it infuses spaces with public life, effectively transforming them.

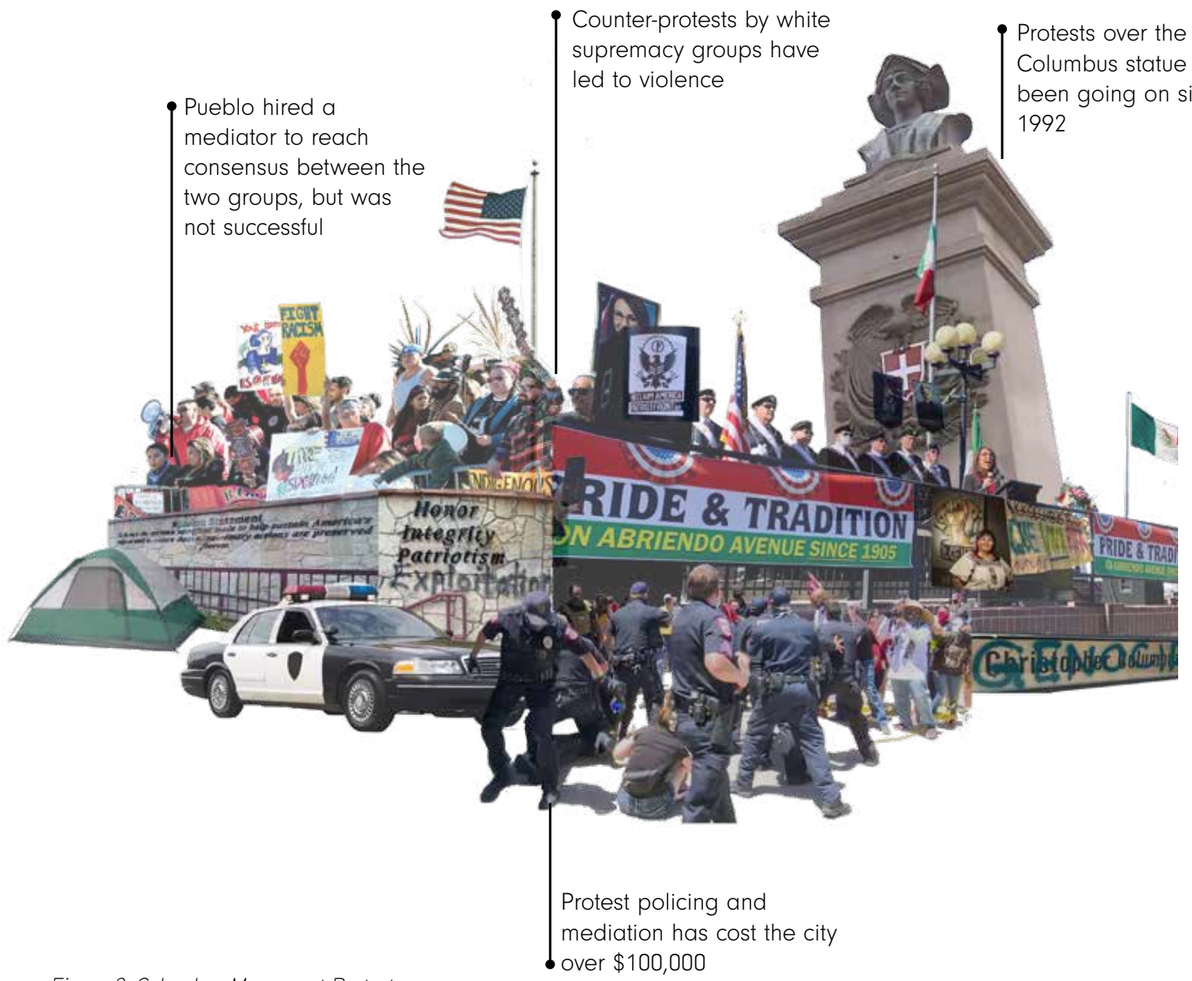


Figure 3: Columbus Monument Protests.

When public art is city-sanctioned, it instead is an official cultural expression that upholds dominant historical narratives from the perspectives of the winners. It portrays events, people, and meanings that are 'worthy' of being told, perpetuating a domineering 'truth'.[10] This type of public art is not truly public in the same sense as Mouffe describes. Instead, it performs fantasies of a public sphere that is unified and homogenous; in short, a public sphere that cannot exist. Alternative identities are erased, along with conflict between the identities that is responsible for the production of that space.

Critical public art is often conceived as the equitable solution to this traditional framework. But although critical art can be a direct challenge to the idea of public space as one commodified image, it may still suppress conflict by reducing plural narratives into one cohesive counter-story. Critical art can never solve issues of equity or misrepresentation unless it opens up conversation and confrontation between narratives.

Chantal Mouffe outlines agonism as key principle for equitable art, meaning that multiple narratives exist simultaneously and often directly in conflict within the same space. This allows for public art to continuously confront the space, viewers, and other art even while it transforms these relationships. Though this type of contested public art has been discussed in a theoretical framework by Mouffe, it is rarely translated to practice. Cento Bull and Clarke describe it within counter-memorial contexts using the Victory Monument as an example, saying the layering of fascist symbology with critical, present references allows the piece to "refuse to graciously accept the burden of memory but [...] throw[s] it back at the [viewer's] feet."[12] In this, they acknowledge that cultural narratives and memory are continuously reinterpreted based on the viewer's constructed identity.[13] Research has not been done to expand this idea to an entire public art system, or to extend it with the lens of landscape architecture, where the landscape tends to be viewed as a container for public art rather than a critical part of the art-making itself.

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[10] Mouffe 2005. "Which Public Space for Critical Artistic Practices?" Presented at the Institute of Choreography and Dance.
[11] Habermas, Lennox and Lennox. 1964. The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964). New German Critique 3: 49-55
[12] Young 1992. The counter-monument: Memory against itself in Germany today. Critical Inquiry 18(2): 277.
[13] Cento Bull and Clarke 2020. Agonistic interventions into public commemorative art: An innovative form of counter-memorial practice? Constellations; 1-15.

METHODS

To achieve the goals of interrogating Pueblo's public art system and proposing an alternative framework, this study uses a mixed methods approach with quantitative, qualitative, and geospatial data.

First, an initial analysis of public art and monuments across Pueblo is conducted. Kerri Bennett's 2016 thesis research identifying all existing public artwork in Pueblo is used as a starting point. Site visits to Pueblo expand the database to over 750 pieces of artwork. Dominant themes for each public art piece are interpreted through image analysis. A media analysis is conducted to identify artists for each public art piece along with their places of residency and demographics. These data are then translated into a GIS, through which spatial patterns of distribution and demographics can be identified when layered with Census data.

Next, informal interviews are conducted with Pueblo residents, artists, and community organizers. Participants are asked to describe their experience with Pueblo's public art pieces, political infrastructure, and perspectives for the future. These interviews are used as the starting point for further literature research into Pueblo's public art and equitable alternatives.

Finally, the quantitative and qualitative data are combined to construct a case study of Pueblo's Riverwalk, a premiere art destination and 'jewel of Pueblo'. A new art infrastructure is proposed for the Riverwalk that incorporates art, people, and the landscape as a coming-together of conflicting stories and identities.

RESULTS

1. What are the dominant narratives told by Pueblo's public art?

Much of Pueblo's public art is evocative of other places; sunbursts and mosaic canyons from Santa Fe, Greek and Roman-inspired sculptures. This is at the expense of neglecting stories from Pueblo that make it unique, like the rise and fall of the steel industry, changing land ownership, and rich history of labor and unions. Dawn DiPrince, Director of History Colorado and longtime resident of Pueblo, attributes this to deep cultural trauma and shaming throughout the city's history, saying: "at the heart of it, we believe that who we are is not good enough."

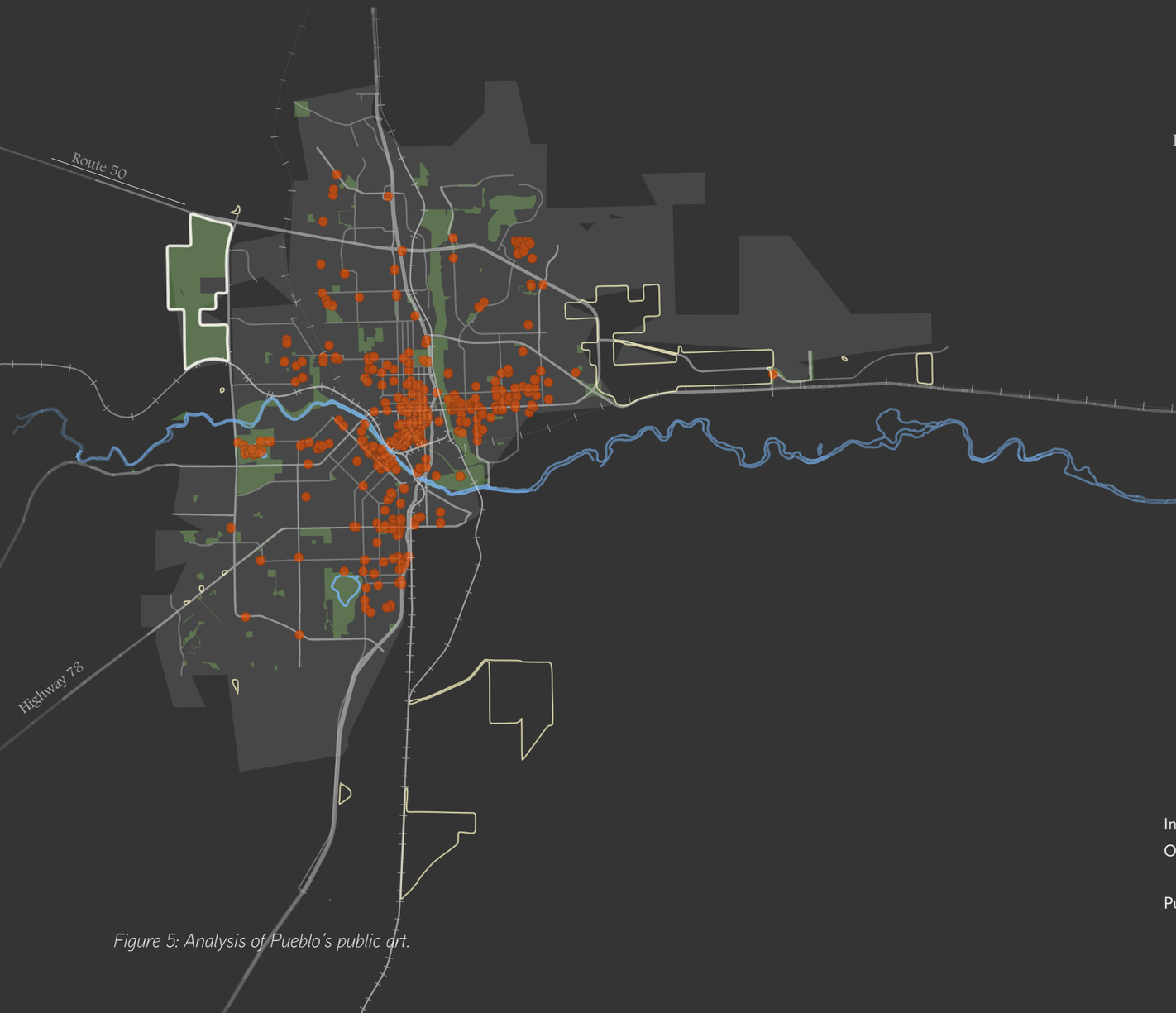
What stories are missing?

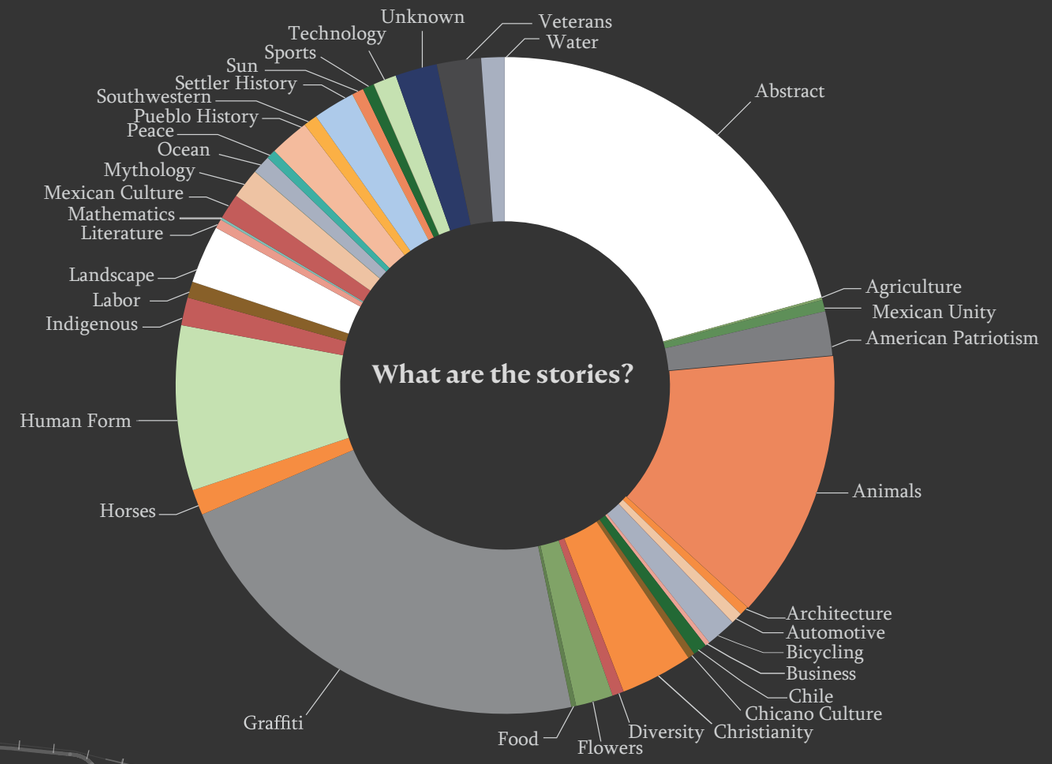
- Chicano heritage and movement
- Indigenous heritage
- Industrial legacy and pride (steel, rail)
- Labor history and union significance
- Agriculture
- Importance of water

Figure 4: Missing stories in Pueblo's public art.

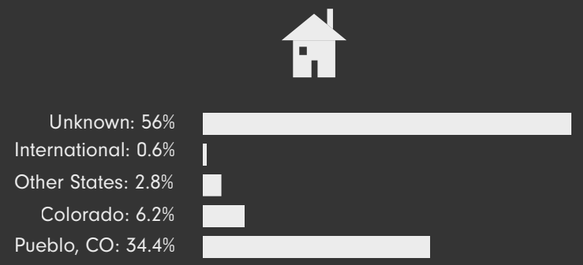
> "That's the problem- we try to tell a story that isn't ours."
>
> — Matte Refic, Pueblo artist

Spatially, artwork is concentrated downtown with specified creative corridors and public funding. Artists are predominantly white, contrasting with the demographics of Pueblo's residents who are 55% nonwhite. Two dominant types of art emerge from the analysis: abstract, and graffiti.





Who are the artists?



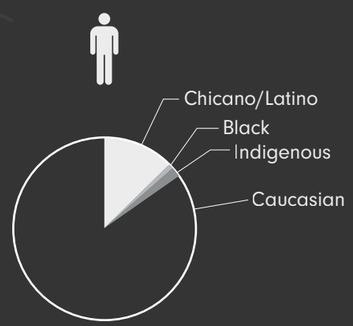
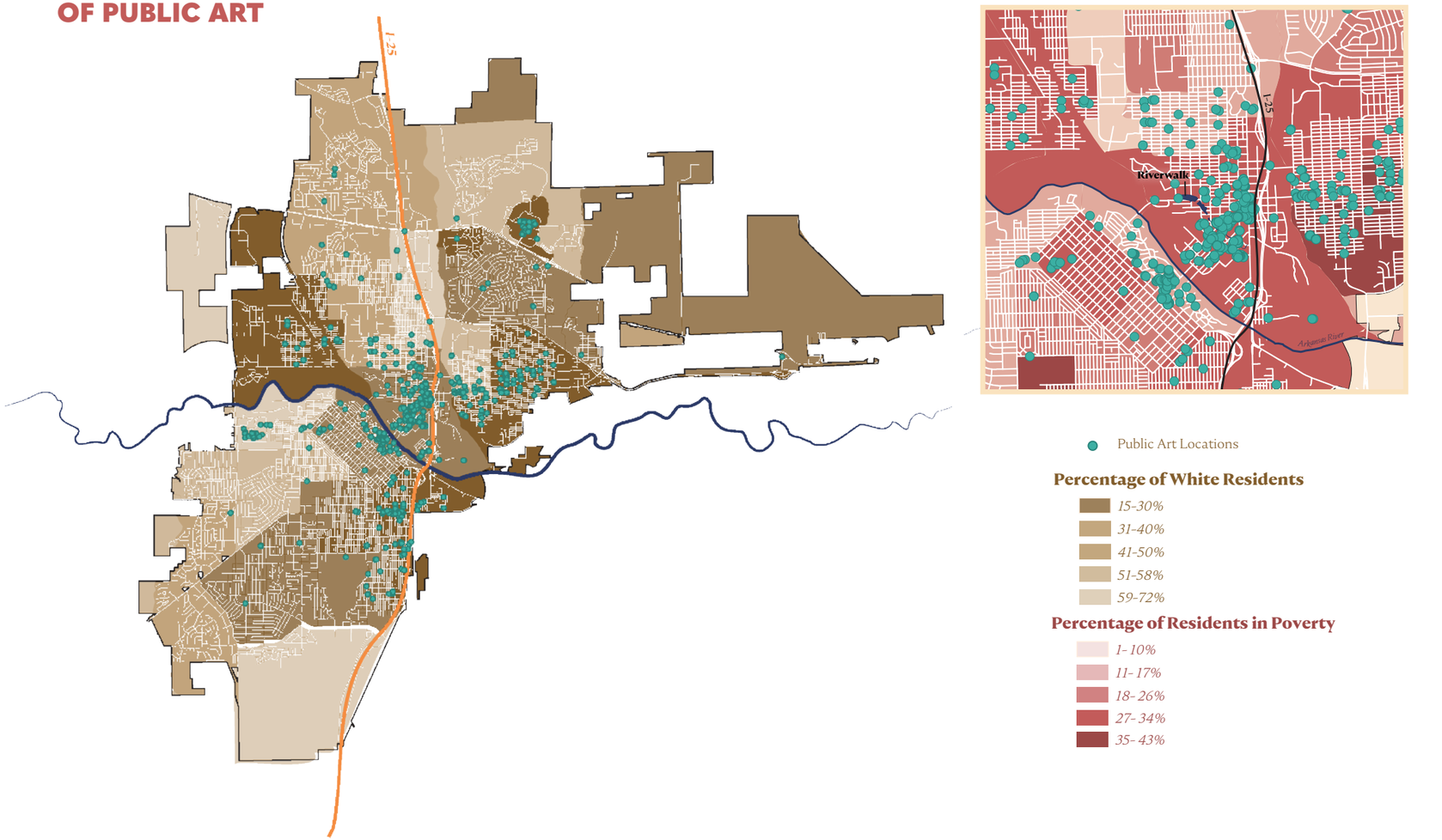


Figure 5: Analysis of Pueblo's public art.

Interestingly, abstract and graffiti art are in almost direct opposition to each other. Abstract art came out of a critical practice that challenged traditional ideas of aesthetics, but has been re-appropriated within neoliberalism for corporate advertising. Pueblo's abstract art tends to fall into this depoliticized, purely aesthetic form where the art pieces are often telling no narrative at all.

On the other hand, the proliferation of graffiti art in Pueblo speaks to a more critical, political narrative. Graffiti tends to directly challenge public space by ignoring how laws and property rights govern spatial expression. This form of art can be a protest against the perceived prioritization of profit over public space, or the lack of public participation. in city planning Graffiti in Pueblo may suggest that residents have an unfulfilled need to narrate their own stories and find representation within the public sphere.

SPATIAL DEMOGRAPHICS OF PUBLIC ART



Data sources: Kerry Bennett, City of Pueblo Open Data, DRCOG

Figure 6: Spatial patterns of public art distribution.

Another prominent theme in the Pueblo's art includes animals, especially with Southwestern origins including bison, mustangs, and bears. Some of these animals once existed in Pueblo but now only remain as representations, connected to humans in relationships of domination or exploitation. The human form was also a popular theme, but portrayed as a bland, homogenized figure without any specific ethnic features. In these instances, the form can be interpreted as white as it follows Western standards of beauty, thus furthering the narrative that the typical Pueblo experience is white.

An analysis was also conducted on the spatial distribution of art pieces and the city's demographics. No real relationship was apparent. There was a high concentration of art pieces in the lower income center of the city, but this is also the downtown district where improvements are made for tourism.

2. How can Pueblo's public art system be equitable?

Characteristics

Equal amount of stories from all cultures

Agonistic

Participatory

Evolving but consistent

Locations

Where locals frequent

Equally distributed throughout city

Where tourists frequent

Figure 7: An equitable public art framework.

To ensure that all cultural stories are equitably represented, stories that have been erased for centuries need to be targeted first as themes for new art pieces. As growth continues into the future, missing stories should be continuously re-evaluated and added to as circumstances evolve.

During an interview, artist Matte Refic spoke to the importance of having artwork evolve within Pueblo, saying that art can become divorced from the present reality and fixated on the past if it does not change. Simultaneously Dawn DiPrince emphasized the need for art to be fixtures in space to represent people's history as an expression of memory and ancestry. If those pieces were erased and replaced with something else, the significance of these stories would be lost. This indicates that there needs to be a balance between having artwork evolve yet preserved to honor Pueblo's history.

What are the challenges?

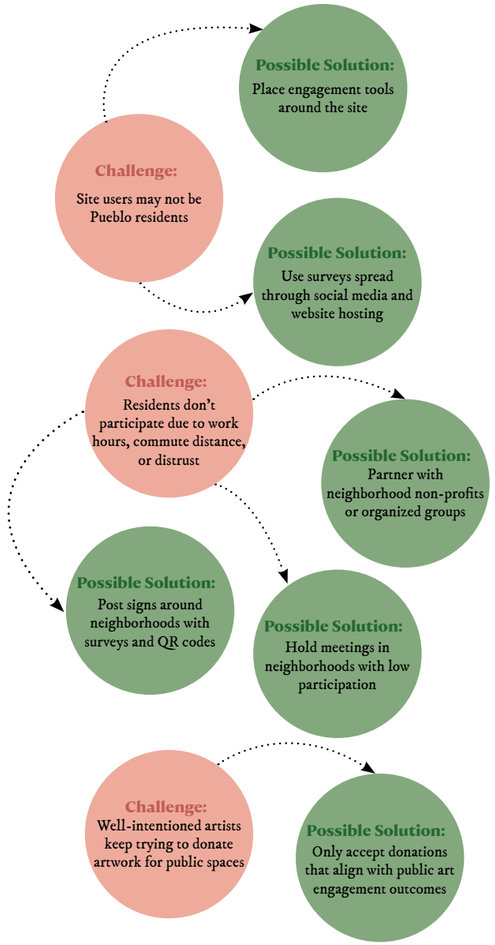


Figure 8: Possible challenges and solutions in the new framework.

An equitable public art framework for Pueblo might have the following traits: agonistic, where stories can exist simultaneously and challenge each other; participatory, where residents can gain power in who gets to tell their stories; representative of the wide cultures and identities that live in the city, and evolving to meet changing needs while maintaining a baseline of memory. This art system might be spread across the city so that all residents benefit from it, or concentrated in areas that have been neglected over time.

Participation in a public art system is especially challenging with users who may not feel comfortable participating, or who may not even be residents.

How can art be participatory?

- For all ages and abilities
- Resident involvement in planning and creation
- Placemaking over place
- Unfinished solutions: temporary and revisited often

3. What would Pueblo's equitable public art framework look like in practice?

Due to its prominence, a case study was used to analyze public art along Pueblo's Riverwalk and to imagine this new art strategy for incorporating conflicting stories in practice. Located in downtown Pueblo, the Historic Arkansas Riverwalk claims to be a "cultural cornerstone" and "gem of Pueblo".[14] The Arkansas River holds great significance to the region as the former border to Mexico and water source in the arid region. City officials used San Antonio's Riverwalk as a precedent for the economic revitalization of the neglected river, leading to a sterile, Disney-like environment landscape of consumption that is divorced from Pueblo's reality.

Figure 9: Art along Pueblo's Riverwalk.

[14] Pueblo Riverwalk Website, 2022.

Figure 10: Art narratives from the Riverwalk.

Art Piece Themes:

- American Patriotism
- Americana Nostalgia
- Western Frontier
- Common Animals
- Mystic and Spiritual
- Other

Of the 60 pieces of art along the Riverwalk, most are realistic bronze sculptures of humans and animals, emphasizing narratives of the Western frontier, traditional American values, and patriotism. There are two sculptures of Indigenous people, both of created by white artists and displaying stereotypical imagery of Indigenous people as barbaric, or mystical. Although over half of Pueblo's population is Hispanic/Chicano, there are no art pieces celebrating that heritage.

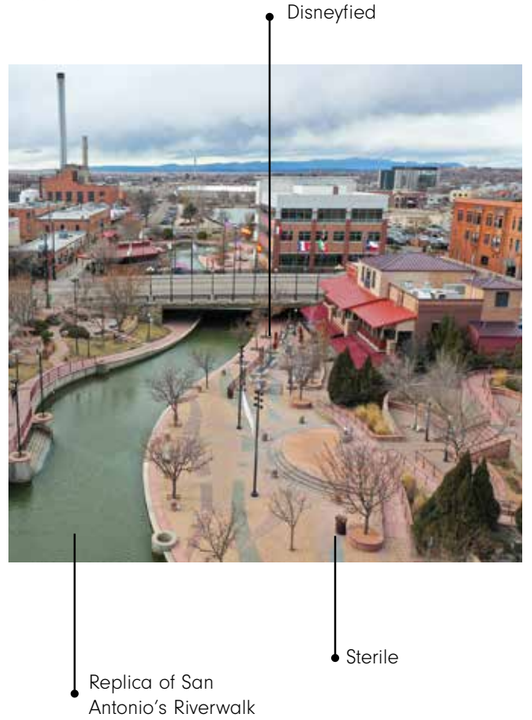


Figure 11: Pueblo's Riverwalk. Image from Pueblo Chieftan.

Kerry Bennett, Pueblo Open Data Portal

Figure 12: Organizing conflicting stories in the art-landscape.

The city publicly states that the Riverwalk is "a perfect background to display this art and tell this story".[15] This reveals the problematic nature of the Riverwalk: it is not a passive landscape upon which stories can be built through the addition of public art pieces. It is an active agent in the making and controlling of narratives. Because landscapes subvertly and evocatively portray narratives, they often allow for a multiplicity of meanings more so than traditional public art pieces.

Design Questions:

1. How can the landscape play an active role in public art narratives?

2. How can multiple, contested stories exist simultaneously?

[15] City Council of Pueblo. "The Historic Arkansas Riverwalk: A Story of Revitalization and Resiliency."

Through a redesign, the Riverwalk landscape can become public art itself, incorporating multiple narratives of culture, identity, and place through a collection of vegetation, materiality, and circulation.

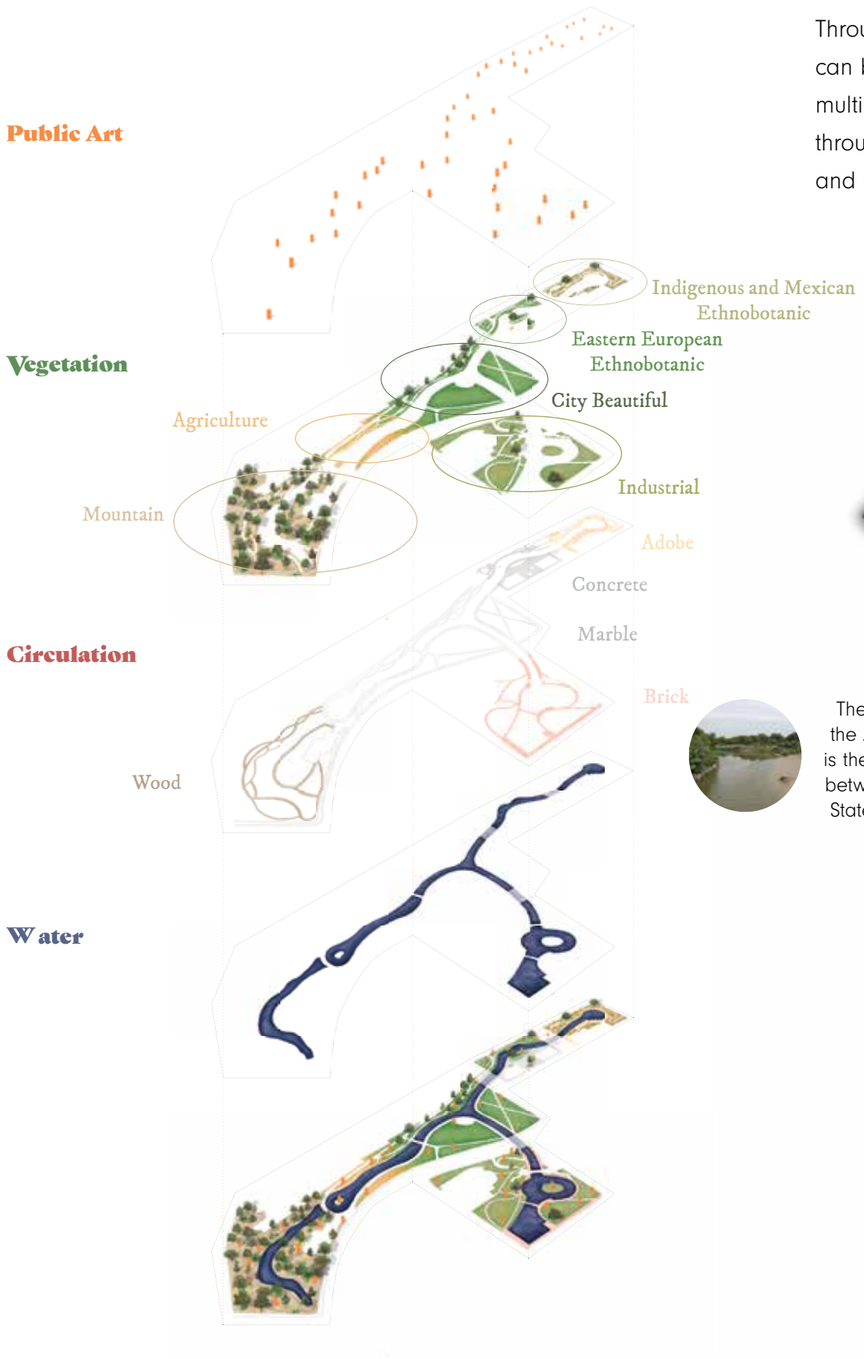


Figure 13: Layered narratives in the landscape.

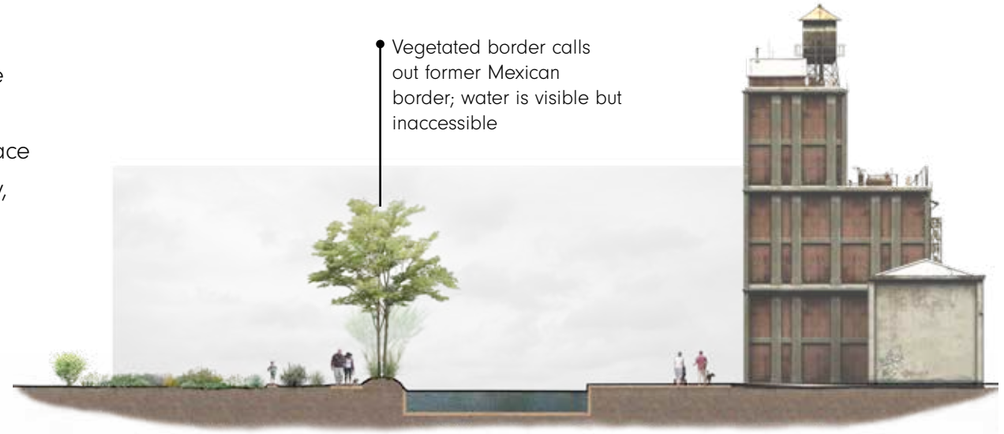


Figure 15: Example of a narrative in the Riverwalk.

The south side of the Arkansas River is the former border between the United States and Mexico

Center for American Values is a non-profit organization seeking to honor traditional American patriotism

Figure 14: Visualizing and contextualizing the art-landscape.

Traditional public artwork is added to create a layered storytelling experience. In this hypothetical Riverwalk case study, public engagement processes begin, focusing on multi-modal, accessible methods that meet people where they are. Through collective voting, an artist is selected. After more deliberation and engagement processes, themes for the new art pieces are selected. Lastly, the artist provides several options for the public to elect. Two different themes for the Riverwalk are selected: the Chicano Movement, and the Western frontier.

Chicano Movement

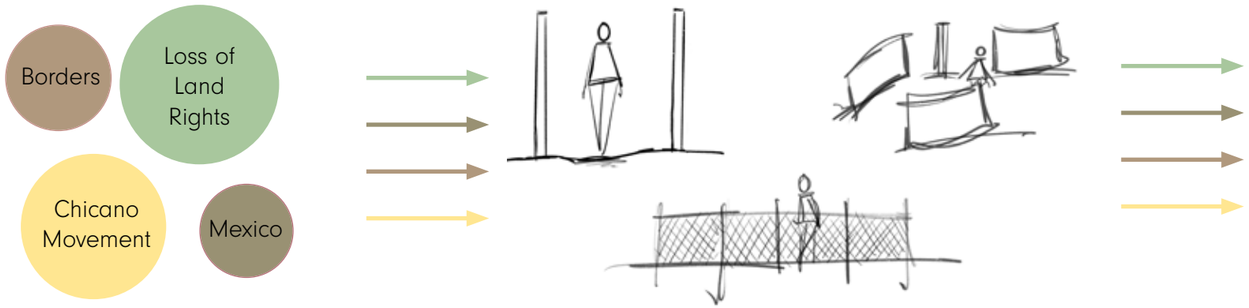
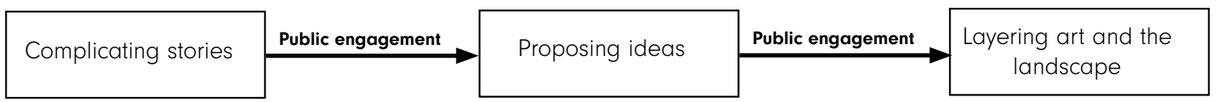


Figure 16: Example of the public art design process for the Chicano Movement selected art piece.



Western Frontier

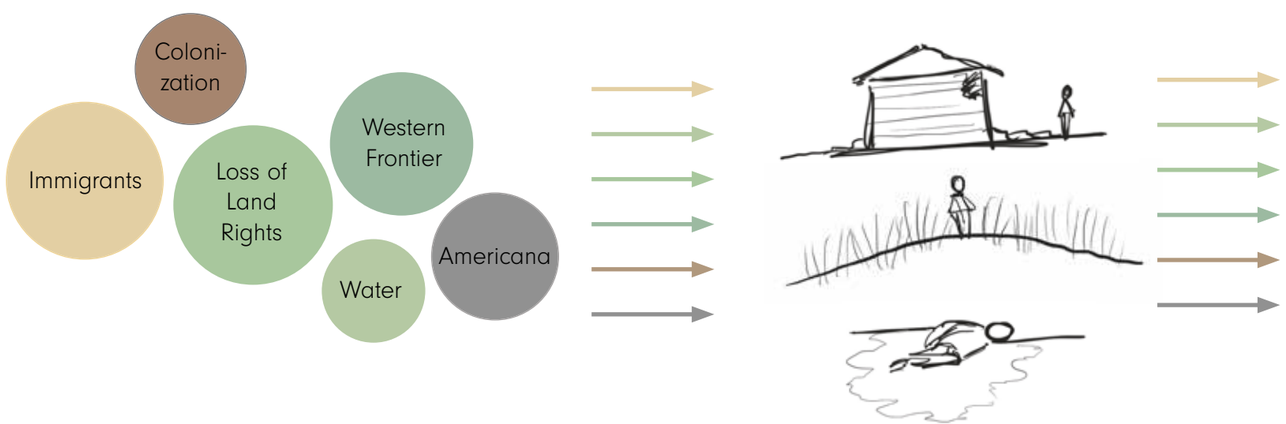


Figure 17: Example of the public art design process for the Western Frontier selected art piece.

CONCLUSION

Like good public art, this study is a beginning; an exploration into how cities might explore ideas of equity and representation in art. It is crucial to consider how residents find representation in public space as it leads to political participation and belonging. In Pueblo, trauma around the erasure of cultural identities over centuries has not yet been healed. If this trauma is not addressed, it will become more significant with each added generation. The conflict around the Christopher Columbus monument may never come to a conclusion; but perhaps by broadening ideas of how public art can communicate conflicting stories, Pueblo might start the healing process.

Figure 18: Example of a public art outcome for labor and union stories.