

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Creating accessible public spaces that feel welcoming to residents and visitors can bring people together to interact across societal fault lines. Improving the symbolic nature of that space can contribute to their sense of belonging, inspire them, advance their understanding, and more. By moving proactively, leaders might also avert divisive, and sometimes violent, conflicts over flags, statues, building names, mascots, rituals, marches, holidays, commemorations, enactments, webpages and media, and other symbols and public spaces. Beyond these potential benefits of a proactive planning approach to enhancing the public environment, a collaborative process can contribute to mutual understanding and appreciation. A planning process can be most effective before conflicts over symbols divide people into opposing camps. By working proactively, leaders and others within a campus, city, region, or state – what we call here for simplicity a “community” – will also respond more constructively and collaboratively when conflicts over symbols or other divisive incidents occur. They will be able to draw on enhanced relationships and detailed plans created beforehand for responding quickly in a volatile situation.

In the midst of conflicts over symbols and public spaces, leaders can help keep people safe. If they have prepared ahead of these conflicts erupting, they can also simultaneously listen and engage community members in examining the interests underlying their reactions to symbols. That engagement might spur a deeper investment in advancing a resilient and just community.

This guide offers promising ideas, explained in more detail in the body of the guide, for pursuing these potential benefits both before and during conflicts over symbols and public spaces. [Leaders’ Checklists](#) for community/university leaders are included at the end for quick reference.

Click on the [underlined titles](#) of any of these specific planning considerations for quick and focused guidance.

When planning proactively (in the absence of conflicts over symbols):

1. **RESEARCH:** Assess the community’s history, politics, law, concerns, identities, divisions, and aspirations as these relate to goals, process, timing, stakeholders, and policies going forward (Points 2-9) for improving symbols and public spaces (p.5).
2. **GOALS:** Make explicit the goals for improving the community or campus environment (e.g., promoting understanding, making all feel valued and safe, inspiring, commemorating) as a means to focus the initiative on the most pertinent symbols and public spaces. Combine these with a deeper approach to reaching these goals (p.9).
3. **PROCESS DESIGN:** Plan, staff, create policies, and provide resources for a collaborative and/or decision-making process or use existing processes. To the extent feasible, engage stakeholders and other community members in constructive discussions, such that the symbols and interactions with them reflect the array of community members’ experience, and the process secures the support of those key to implementation and contributes to public understanding. Clarify where the decision-making power resides (p.12).
4. **TIMING:** Time the process to coincide with a confluence of interests that might contribute to its success (p.15).

5. **SELECTION AND PREPARATION OF A PLANNING GROUP:** Select and prepare a planning group to work constructively together, represent the breadth of the community, have the power to make decisions or lend credibility with decision-makers, and add expertise and bridge-building (p.16).
6. **SYMBOLS EXPERTS:** Consider engaging experts who can offer new ideas, clarify the historical record, and anticipate the ramifications of new or changed symbols and counteract false rumors about the history connected to existing symbols and public spaces (p.18).
7. **OPTIONS:** Develop a range of options for adding to, removing, combining, transforming, and explaining the contested symbols, as well as creative ways to establish interactive spaces, possibly including plans for changes unrelated to symbols (p.22).
8. **IMPLEMENTATION:** Implement the plan with attention to building understanding and relationships among members of the public and dealing with broader concerns that became apparent during the focus on symbols and public spaces. Put in place a process to assess and modify what has been created (p.27).
9. **PLAN AHEAD FOR CONFLICTS:** Develop a plan for addressing likely future conflict situations (p.28).

When symbols conflicts emerge:

10. **LISTEN AND OFFER SAFE EXPRESSION AVENUES:** Listen to staff and others who have relationships with those who care or might later care about the resolution of the symbols conflict and to symbols experts. Determine the root causes, underlying interests, political and legal issues, relevance to history and group identities, emotional investment, and potential for violence regarding each stakeholder group. **Develop safe avenues for expression regarding contested symbols** (p.30).
11. **PROCESS PLANNING:** Weigh a range of resolution processes for both the symbols/public spaces conflict and the underlying concerns, with options ranging from a quick decision to a long-range collaborative process, including multiple options in between, such as a mediation, commission, and arts council. Decide on a process or a range of processes. Appoint members. Prepare those involved in the processes so that they will work constructively. Offer emotional support for those involved, should they become a focus of hate or controversy. Make clear who has ultimate decision-making power. Coordinate with other public bodies that have authority regarding these matters (p.33).
12. **OPTIONS:** Develop a range of options for dealing with the underlying non-symbols issues as well as options for adding to, removing, combining, transforming, and explaining the contested symbols. Consider new approaches, such as creation of a new common space (p.37).
13. **COMMUNICATIONS:** Expand communications capabilities so that people hear consistent messages frequently, residents know where to go for information, and the staff is prepared to field questions from national as well as local media (p.39).
14. **PLAN AHEAD OF THE NEXT CONFLICT:** Follow the resolution with proactive planning, as described in Points 1-9 above (p.40).