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A Racial Equity Monument, From Hank Willis Thomas, Is Set for Boston

The memorial, called "The Embrace" and designed by Thomas and architects at MASS Design Group, will honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King.



A rendering of "The Embrace," which will be built on the Boston Common in 2022.
Credit: Hank Willis Thomas and MASS Design Group

Next year, the nation's oldest public park, the Boston Common, will unveil one of the largest memorials in the country dedicated to racial justice: "The Embrace," designed by the artist Hank Willis Thomas and architects at MASS Design Group.

The monument, a 22-foot-high bronze memorial honoring the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King's commitment to racial equity, will consist of two pairs of bronze arms, intertwined in a circle. It is based on a photograph of the Kings embracing after Dr. King won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

Thomas is a conceptual artist who has become known in recent years for public sculptures — including those in Brooklyn and at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala. — that explore Black identity and history. He also helped found For Freedoms, an artist-run political action committee that has sponsored public artworks and billboards around the country intended to galvanize political participation and public debate.

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Imari Paris Jeffries, executive director of King Boston, a private nonprofit organization that has worked with the city of Boston on this project, said, "Our country has been for a long time, and in a really rapid way in 2020, having a conversation interrogating the meaning of monuments and memorials." They are "inherently political and hold meaning, and so we thought about what it would mean for Boston to be a place that is inclusive, and to build one to that," he added.

"The Embrace" will be constructed on a new plaza, which will be called the 1965 Freedom Rally Memorial Plaza, to commemorate a march the Kings led from the Roxbury neighborhood to the Boston Common. The project has been

in the works since 2016. King Boston has raised approximately \$12 million and is hoping to raise another \$3 million from philanthropists and Boston-based businesses, with an eye on unveiling the work in October 2022.

"At this moment in 2021 we are asking: What would it be for Boston to be the epicenter of civil rights? And of economic and racial justice?" Jeffries said. "We want to imagine that and do that."

—Sophie Haigney