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Along the Columbia River, Making a Monument of the Land

In the Pacific Northwest, Maya Lin's 'art landscapes' celebrate the river's partnership with Native American tribes.

The Listening Circle amphitheater at Chief Timothy Park is on an island in the Snake River near Clarkston, Wash. via Confluence Project

By Alex V. Cipolle

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This article is part of our latest special report on Museums, which focuses on reopening, reinvention and resilience.

On a spring morning, the Vancouver Land Bridge appears to be a bridge alive, lush with native plants fluttering in the wind as joggers follow its wavy path. Its long arc — about a third of a mile — weaves and soars over Highway 14, reconnecting the Columbia River with the ancient Klickitat Trail, said to have been used by Northwest tribes for millenniums.

Ten miles north of Portland, Ore., the earth-covered pedestrian bridge, completed in 2008, was a collaboration between the architect Johnpaul Jones, best known for his work on the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, and the artist and architect Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Ms. Lin's maquette of the land bridge is the centerpiece of "Along the Columbia River: Maya Lin and the Confluence Project," which will be on view through Dec. 15 at Whitman College's Maxey Museum in Walla Walla, Wash., and online.

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Using architectural models, blueprints, correspondence, interviews, geological surveys and other archival materials, "Along the Columbia River" is the first retrospective to outline the scope and impact of the Confluence Project, a Washington-Oregon nonprofit that seeks to educate the public about the river system's significance through the voices of Northwest tribes and to counter the myth that Lewis and Clark "discovered" this land.

At the land bridge, "We grabbed the prairie and pulled it over the highway," Mr. Jones has said.

The Vancouver Land Bridge runs over Highway 14 about 10 miles north of Portland, Ore. The earth-covered pedestrian bridge, completed in 2008, was a collaboration between the architect Johnpaul Jones and the artist and architect Maya Lin. Bruce Forster, via Confluence Project

It is among six public "art landscapes" the Confluence Project commissioned Ms. Lin to design along 438 miles of the Columbia River system, from the basalt fish-cleaning table engraved with the Chinook creation story at Cape Disappointment State Park on the Washington coast to the story circles at Sacagawea Historical State Park and the Listening Circle amphitheater at Chief Timothy Park on an island in the Snake River near Clarkston, Wash.

Each site was chosen by Columbia River tribes to mark a significant confluence, or spot where bodies of water or cultures converge. Five of the six are complete.

"The Confluence Project *built* that bridge," said Antone Minthorn, chairman of the Confluence Project board and a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. "You begin to wonder, well, what is our legacy?"

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Mr. Minthorn said the project works to unite a small group of people — Native Americans — with their fellow citizens in learning how to "become American" and how best to steward the land together. The goal, he said, is to create visual markers, not monuments per se, that are in harmony with the landscape and serve as reminders that "just because you don't see us does not mean we are not here."

"The education of non-Native people about the Indigenous history of this place helps them to become more from this place, and of this place," Mr. Minthorn said.

Maya Lin in 2005 working on a basalt fish-cleaning table for Cape Disappointment State Park on the Washington coast. via Whitman College and Northwest Archives

An artist rendering of the amphitheater and path at Cape Disappointment State Park's Waikiki Beach. via Whitman College and Northwest Archives

For two decades, the nonprofit — founded by Mr. Minthorn and tribal leaders, community arts advocates and historians — has sought to reclaim the narrative of discovery and Manifest Destiny.

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The exhibition also highlights how these projects offer alternative ways of honoring histories and living cultures in a period marked by the toppling of statues and the rejection of celebrated individuals frozen in time and stone.

"We're responding to a growing hunger to know more about what it means to be from here and to have a better relationship to our environment," said Colin Fogarty, executive director of the Confluence Project.

In April, Whitman and Confluence hosted "An Evolutionary Moment for Monuments," a panel discussion for the exhibition.

"We are not monument builders," explained Bobbie Conner, director of the Tamastslikt Cultural Institute, a Confluence educator and also a member of the tribes of the Umatilla reservation. "We do not construct edifices or sculptures or obelisks to pay heed to the past. We keep track of the past in our oral histories, in our hearts and in our minds."

The story circles at Sacagawea Historical State Park are a series of seven basalt installations at the confluence of the Snake and Columbia rivers. Meagan Moore, via Confluence Project

The event's moderator was Matthew Reynolds, an art professor at Whitman who is writing a book on the Confluence Project. He said that when he took his students or his ("mostly white") friends to the Confluence sites, they were often confounded by their simplicity.

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"They're expecting this great artwork that rises out of the earth or calls attention to itself and screams: 'I am a great work of art. Look just at me and don't look at anything else around me,'" he said. "What I find most poignant about the Confluence Project is that it resists that kind of looking. It asks viewers to work harder, and it also calls attention to the landscape around it, and it asks you to move around and experience those sites as whole environments."

The Confluence Project and Ms. Lin do not ignore the roles of Lewis and Clark and other non-Native Americans; rather they use the explorers' copious documentation as supplementary material, secondary to the primary source of Native voices and oral traditions.

The explorers, Mr. Fogarty said, "didn't discover this place, but they took really great notes."

The Land Bridge, for example, features panels identifying native plants and how they were used by regional tribes alongside panels about the campsite of Lewis and Clark and the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company's first European trading post, now Fort

Vancouver.

The Bird Blind's slats are engraved with the common and scientific names of all the bird species Lewis and Clark noted in their journey. Dylan Woock, via Confluence Project

At the Sandy River Delta site, 20 miles east of Portland, Ms. Lin's elliptical wooden Bird Blind structure is composed of slats engraved with the common and scientific names of all the bird species Lewis and Clark noted in their journey.

"My goal at times was to disappear, not to add an artwork, but my art was to erase prior damage and to restore a connection back to the environment, allowing the visitor a visceral and intimate connection back to the land itself," Ms. Lin has written of the project. (Another of Ms. Lin's installations with an environmental theme opened this month in New York City. "Ghost Forest," in Madison Square Park through November, illustrates the effects of climate change on a once-vibrant woodland.)

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"Along the Columbia River" also includes tribal correspondence and Ms. Lin's plans for a project at Celilo Falls near The Dalles, Ore., where disagreements have halted the work.

The Columbia River tribes consider Celilo Falls, once abundant with salmon, to be sacred, a site with a rich tribal history of fishing, culture and trade, which some say dates back at least 16,000 years.

In 1957, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed The Dalles Dam, which flooded the falls and altered salmon migration and spawning. The work destroyed “entire Native villages and treaty-guaranteed fishing sites, and with them the economic, cultural and spiritual livelihood of thousands of Indian people,” according to the National Museum of the American Indian.

Celilo Falls, near The Dalles, Ore., is the site of a proposed design by Maya Lin that features a 500-foot walkway above the water. via Maya Lin Studio

Ms. Lin’s designs for the site include the Celilo Arc, a 500-foot walkway above the water that pays homage to the native fishing platforms that once rose from rushing waters. The project has the support of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and the Nez Perce Tribe, but in 2018 the Yakama Nation withdrew its backing, concerned that the site would be further damaged.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers confirmed that the project is on hold until all affected tribes agree.

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In the meantime, Confluence is focusing on what they call the seventh site, an educational program connecting tribal artists and culture bearers to students in Washington and Oregon schools.

“There’s not an expiration on doing what we need to do,” said Ms. Conner, the Confluence educator. “We expect to be here forever.”

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