

# Striking Combinations: Transformation and Dissonance at the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky

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Display halls can be seen, in part, as polemical fortifications meant to hold through the artful presentation of words, pictures, sounds and objects, the hearts and minds of visitors. (Luke viii)

We visit museums for different reasons: to be moved, to be instructed, to be entertained, to be inspired. But regardless of our reasons, experiences in museums are always mediated by the sights and sounds, the exhibits and their arrangements, the labels and narratives that surround us there. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill explains, in museums “objects are used to materialize, concretize, represent, or symbolize ideas and memories, and through their processes objects enable abstract ideas to be grasped, facilitate the verbalization of thought, and mobilize reflection on experience and knowledge” (111). Of course, individual experiences also depend in part on “personal biography, cultural background, and interpretive community” (Hooper-Greenhill 119), which shape the stories each of us finds. But museums tell their own stories as well, providing visitors with designed “invitations to meaning” (Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki 87). These invitations give coherence and unity to the displays and encourage “collective values and social understandings” (Luke xiii). At times and for various reasons, the sites that Timothy Luke describes in the epigraph above can fail to hold our “hearts and minds”—sometimes because of the “artfulness” of the presentations that overwhelm the

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museum's narrative and sometimes because the details of the narrative itself weaken its "fortifications."

As Carole Blair and Neil Michel explain, most public sites that commemorate individuals or groups invite some form of thoughtful reflection. For example, the Astronauts Memorial at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida honors "U.S astronauts and test pilots who have died in the line of duty" (Blair and Michel 32). Careful readers like Blair and Michel notice how the Memorial "provokes questions about the character and value of the human's relationship to the machine. It offers no clear answers; rather, it seems to maintain a studied ambivalence about the issues it poses, inviting visitors to decide for themselves" (38). However, visitors often fail to observe the reflective mission of the Memorial because the details of its design too closely echo the nearby Walt Disney World theme park, which privileges "comfort" rather than "confrontation." These echoes enable visitors to avoid "interrogat[ing] [their] experiences and [them]selves in relation to the memorial's discourse" (Blair and Michel 36-7). Rather, they can forget the deaths of the astronauts and pilots, and see the Memorial as a "happy place."

A similar conflict between invited meaning and interpretation seems to be at work at the Muhammad Ali Center (MAC)<sup>1</sup> in Louisville, Kentucky, where design choices obscure the power of the exhibits and the transformative values they represent. In this case, design not only protects visitors from unsettling messages, it also promotes idealizations that interfere with the work of the Center. Much of Ali's story there shows him rising from obscurity to fame; in presenting episodes in Ali's life that tell

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank Jeanie Kahnke and Becky Morris from the Muhammad Ali Center for their help supplying resources and images for this project.

this story, the Center's choices obscure its main narrative: to rewrite Ali's legend and to inspire personal and social change.

This essay examines how MAC's message of transformation and social justice is compromised by complexities of design, narrative focus, and content. First, we suggest that the design of the facility reifies Ali's larger-than-life persona resulting in Ali—not his values or, more broadly, not a life driven by culturally approved values—becoming the star attraction. Second, we demonstrate that chaotic and confusing layouts make any narrative of transformation largely inaccessible. Like a boxer using combinations—a series of punches, usually related in some way, in which the boxer shifts his weight as he quickly alternates jabs, hooks, crosses, uppercuts to throw off his opponent, body leaning in and out, feet moving quickly in different patterns, right hand and left hand, right and left, ideally ending with a final knockout—MAC overwhelms visitors with different kinds of “noise.” Finally, we claim that the difficult subjects tied to Ali's experience—most notably racism and disability—make the social justice mission a tough sell to those who come simply to see a monument to “the greatest.” Ultimately, Ali's legend, MAC's “disorienting” design (Nichols 134), and its difficult subjects make it too easy for visitors to ignore the complex racial, social and political histories on display and, thus, unlikely to directly pursue the personal or community change MAC calls on us to make.

### An Invitation to Re-Interpret Ali

Located in downtown Louisville, overlooking the Ohio River, the Muhammad Ali Museum and Educational Center opened in 2005. According to Susan Shaeffer-Nahmias, its original curator, Ali insisted that the Center be built in his hometown, and Ali and his wife Lonnie read every text used in the Center, saw every image, approved all architectural features so they could be assured that it would fulfill their primary

purpose: to extend the influence of Ali's values (Shaeffer-Nahmias). As Ali said,

I am an ordinary man who worked hard to develop the talent I was given. I believed in myself and I believe in the goodness of others. . . . I wanted more than a building to house my memorabilia. I wanted a place that would inspire people to be the best they could be in whatever they chose to do and to encourage them to be respectful of one another. (*MAC Presskit*)

In Lonnie Ali's words, the Center's aim was to be "a place that would shape, teach and inspire people" (Lockwood). In grander terms, the official description calls MAC "both a destination site and an international education and cultural center" that "reaches beyond its physical walls to fulfill its mission" (*MAC Fact Sheet*).

These walls are the product of collaboration between architectural firms Bleyer Blinder Belle, Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership, and the Bravura Corporation.<sup>2</sup> MAC's Executive Designer, Lee Skolnick, explains that the facility reflects "embodiment," with its design carefully integrating both form and function. As an architectural philosophy, embodiment encourages designers to "infuse their core mission, themes and concepts into *all* aspects of their sites, buildings, and exhibits, thereby instilling a sense of specificity, an organic rightness

<sup>2</sup> Since its opening, MAC has been widely heralded for its design. It has won many awards, including: Best Museum Environment, Silver Design Awards, Event Design Magazine (2006); Best Places List, Pathfinders Travel Magazine (2006 and 2007); Best New Attraction Award, North American Travel Journalists Association (2006); Media and Technology Award/Exhibit "The Greatest"; Bronze MUSE Award for Video, the American Association of Museums (2007); Official Best of "Best Cultural Attraction" in the State of Kentucky (2011) (Muhammad Ali Center).

unique to their situations" (emphasis added, Skolnick 123). Embodied design generates "harmony" between built space and the narratives embodied by the site (123). For MAC, this means integrating Ali and his values into every aspect of the Center. About MAC, Skolnick writes:

[T]o honour and further the humanitarian achievements of 'The Greatest, 'the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky, had to embody the strength, power, lightness, speed, and grace that Ali brought to 'the ring' and to the field of human empowerment, respect and understanding. . . . On a substantive experiential level, the story of Ali's evolution as a professional, as a world ambassador and as a man is traced through a spatial organization that uses the timeline of his life as an armature. Along it are hung both the key moments in his development and the broader themes that they represent, and that tie his experience to the lives of each visitor. In ascending through the space along with Ali, we are all encouraged to be the greatest we can be. (129)

By employing embodied design, MAC attempts to close the distance between Ali and visitors so that they are encouraged to *become* "the greatest." Of course, Skolnick's intention is but one piece of the larger rhetorical puzzle and we would echo Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, who suggest that examining designed invitations to meaning does not necessarily amount to intentional fallacy. In fact, exploring a facility's purpose and history can help to clarify the forces that shape both construction and function (Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki 87).

Skolnick and his team want to create a metonymic relationship between Ali and MAC. The two should be largely inseparable in exhibits that embody the success story of Ali organized in stations around each of his core values of *respect, confidence, conviction, dedication, giving, and spirituality*. Invited to reconsider their positions as citizens of the world in light of his life story, visitors are prompted first to identify with Ali and

then to move beyond mere identification and toward *transformation*, a term used by Kenneth Burke to describe an adaptation or “self-immolation” in which one’s identity may be “reborn” as something new (11). More specifically, transformation reflects a “desire to *transform the principle* which that person *represents*” (Burke’s emphasis, 13), to recreate or resurrect the person entirely, aligned and identified with a revised set of principles. MAC achieves this transformative goal for the “Louisville Lip” as we see him evolve from brash fighter to tireless humanitarian. But while this depiction of an evolving Ali is powerful, it does not necessarily lead visitors to their own transformations. Can it? Should it? Should *his* values become *their* values? Should his choice to define his life by values be imitated? These questions emerge from a problematic gap that we see between theory and practice in Skolnick’s plans for the facility.

Such transformations are always difficult. In “Doing Identity Work in Museums,” Jay Rounds explains that visitors undergo transformation via identity creation, a process by which “we construct, maintain, and adapt our sense of personal identity, and persuade other people to believe that identity” (33). The museum, according to Rounds, is a “low risk” environment where we can try on personas, re-shaping and refashioning our own identity, and exploring perspectives that may be vastly different from our own. More importantly, we “can act as . . . ‘objective’ observer[s], without risking being tainted by participation” (Rounds 146). This notion of “identity work” demonstrates a double bind for MAC and Ali as the curators want education and social justice to be the Center’s priority while visitors often want only to see Muhammad Ali. In essence, visitors want to “try on” *his* stardom, *his* philanthropy, without necessarily having to transform themselves, an action that would implicate them in both his experiences and his values.

Perhaps if Ali’s life had been simpler, a story leading to transformation could have been more clearly and convincingly told. But both his life and

the relationship of his values to his life suggest a complexity that cannot be easily presented and even less easily assimilated. In fact, simplifications of Ali's story lead to idealizations. While MAC reputedly represents both Ali's virtues and his flaws, the focus is ever on a heroic man. For example, Michael Ezra explains that the facility does not foreground moments where Ali has "veered . . . from his supposed core tenets of respect, confidence, conviction, dedication, giving, and spirituality" (190). He points to Ali's taunting opponents and the apparent contradictions in Ali's beliefs about race relations and the status of women. Ezra's harshest criticisms suggest that MAC papers over the negative aspects of Ali's life in order to prioritize a version that is both "accessible" and acceptable to a broad public. This version of a heroic Ali is rendered throughout the facility, beginning with its exterior where a giant mural shows Ali's face and boxing figure in action to suggest the power and strength of the man. The gently folding roof of the Center recalls Ali's famous 'float like a butterfly.' The five-story aluminum cone evokes the torch carried by Ali in the 1996 Olympics. From the moment we approach MAC, this massive and very public Ali obscures the more complex and value-based Ali we are meant to experience inside. Instead mythic figures like the Ali displayed here often hold sway over cultural memory. Jeanne van Eeden, working from Roland Barthes' notion of cultural "myth," explains how mythologies function as "go-to" reference points for cultural memory, particularly in the context of painful histories. She says "the apparatus of myth naturalizes, renders innocuous, and legitimates social constructions. Mythic discourse invariably reduces things to the simplicity of essences or stereotypes, and 'freezes into an eternal reference' that which it wishes to justify" (Van Eeden 20). Ultimately, it is easier to see Ali as a myth fixed in history, as only and always a celebrity, despite the fact that MAC offers extensive commentary related to subjects like global education, race and social justice, and human rights.

To better understand how visitors interpret the Center's invitations to meaning we turn to comments they left at MAC and online. The voices of visitors have been notably silent from scholarship about museums, even in *Museum Studies* (Kirchberg and Trondle). While these voices do not tell the entire story—visitor comments represent a very small and highly interested population—they are helpful in illuminating narrative threads that circulate between designer, subject, and audience.<sup>3</sup> In the end, they give us a place to begin analyzing how designed space is or is not being interpreted. And there is some precedent for this sort of work. Blair and Michel explain that “real audiences” often constitute unfamiliar ground for rhetorical critics (46) who are generally more invested in theoretical nuance than audience reaction. However, visitor reactions can suggest how meanings may be lost when a text fails to evoke the right cultural cues and codes.

In our analysis of visitor comments, we observed that individuals access the facility through a number of distinct, but often overlapping, interpretive lenses. For some patrons, MAC is the literal embodiment of Ali; they refer to him by name in their comments, aligning the structure with the man himself. For example:

<sup>3</sup> We examined comments left in the MAC visitor books, along with comments posted to the popular consumer rating websites Yelp and TripAdvisor, in order to observe rhetorical invitations and the interpretive lenses through which individuals view the facility. Examining 243 total comments, we identified several, often overlapping themes. This method of examining unstructured visitor comments is useful for not only considering what visitors bring to and away from museum spaces (Macdonald; Noy); it also helps us consider how visitors make meaning from the various invitations available in the exhibition.



Well worth traveling 7000 miles! You are my idol and always will be. Keep up your good work, you are an inspiration to all! Thanks a million!—Peace. (Muhammad Ali Center)

Others see MAC as a conventional history or sports history museum and leave disappointed that there isn't more memorabilia:

Despite its beautiful location, excellent organization and inspiring focus, the Ali Center didn't exactly blow me away. As other reviewers have said, the museum didn't include nearly as much memorabilia as I'd hoped they would. Part of the reason I love visiting museums is having the opportunity to see history in person. I find it very, very hard to believe that the Ali museum didn't have access to more championship belts, robes, trunks, pairs of gloves, fight posters, contracts, etc. After a while I felt like I was reading a book rather than visiting a museum. (In fairness, it was a very engaging book!) ("Muhammad Ali Center" Yelp.com)

Still others interpret MAC as a memorial to Ali's life, as a human rights center, or as an educational facility.

Thanks for all the wonderful memories. I've enjoyed your fights. You're still the greatest of all time. Just stopped by to visit your center. It's a great representation of your life and what champions are made of. (Muhammad Ali Center)

Very impressive building but sadly lacking on the whole essence of the legend that is Muhammad Ali. I agree with the previous reviewer that the main focus appears to be on Human Rights and whilst this is a very important subject I felt it was not the best venue and it detracts from the greatness of the big man himself. ("Muhammad Ali Center" TripAdvisor.com)

While it can be argued that MAC is or could be all of these things—a monument, a museum, and a human rights forum—the lack of continuity between invitation and interpretation is fundamentally at odds with MAC's articulated mission: “to preserve and share the legacy and ideals of Muhammad Ali, to promote respect, hope, and understanding, and to inspire adults and children everywhere to be as great as they can be” (*MAC Find Greatness Within*). In fact, visitor comments demonstrate that during their time at MAC, most patrons only grow in their reverence for Ali, they feel like they learn a great deal about his life, and they are inspired or touched by his experiences. However, because the design offers several stories but no overarching theme beyond Ali's greatness, many patrons revert to an iconic reverence for Ali as the embodied presence in the facility rather than seeking out Ali's and Skolnick's stated goal, “to be the greatest *we* can be” (*our emphasis*).

### A Walking Tour of MAC with “Noise”

Ali's heroic story starts near the top of the Center on the fifth floor. To reach it, visitors ride a long narrow escalator from the main lobby that deposits them at a small exhibit on “Ali the Artist,” where videos, voices, and large posters remind us of Ali's creativity—his magic and his rhymes: “Only last night I murdered a rock/Injured a stone, hospitalized a brick/I'm so mean I make medicine sick.”

Nearby, an Orientation Theater presents images of uplifting highlights from Ali's boxing career shown on several screens simultaneously. At the same time lines are read from Rudyard Kipling's poem “If”—“if you can dream. . . yours is the earth and everything that's in it”—suggesting that something special in Ali led him to the dream that defined him. Beyond the Orientation Theater are interactive stations that demonstrate how the values of respect, confidence, conviction, dedication, giving and spirituality (as well as hard work) informed Ali's life. Here, as in the

theater, visitors experience the complexity of the events and of the man, with stress on his most admirable actions.



**Figure 1: Layout of Fifth Floor (Muhammad Ali Center Visitor Guide and Map)**

In defining Ali and his life, these stations use short films, TV stills, photos, newspaper pages, and cartoons; Ali’s voice, commentators’ voices, actors’ voices, even James Brown’s voice singing “Do It to Death”; colors, lights, shadows, and various kinds of activities performed not just by the Champ but by visitors who often find themselves both

acting as and being acted on by Ali. For instance, at various times and in various places, visitors are invited to touch a replica of the stolen bicycle that led Ali to begin boxing; to go into a reproduction of a diner and, like young Ali, hear the owner refusing to serve them because they're "nigger[s]"; to enter a boxing ring to "train with Ali," practicing some of his moves, hitting and being hit by punching bags in order to understand how much strength the bag demands and to know what a punch by Ali feels like. In walking with Ali visitors are faced with a quandary. Ali is heroic; his achievements and accomplishments are everywhere. But MAC fails to demonstrate how visitors can become like him, and its design elements give them little time and space to try.

Attention to Ali's boxing continues down to the quieter fourth floor where visitors can choose to watch clips of Ali's greatest fights edited to 15-20 minute highlights on small consoles. But there are non-boxing exhibits as well: a 55-foot by 10-foot "Hope and Dream" mural of tiles created by children; and "Global Voices," a large floor display representing original poems, messages, and drawings solicited by the Center in response to "What are your hopes for the future? Who is special in your life? What is your wish for the world?" Visitors also find a cabinet with the various awards Ali has received as a peacemaker and as a representative of Parkinson's, and a "Lighting the Way" exhibit with projections and torches that represent the courageous Ali carrying the torch during the Summer Games in Atlanta.

Nowhere is this distance between Ali and museum visitors greater than in the section focused on Dedication. Divided into two areas titled "Train to Win" and "Building Strength and Endurance," this station seems to define "dedication" solely in terms of young Ali's (Cassius Clay's) commitment to being a champion boxer by training, eating carefully, studying other boxers, etc. This definition makes it difficult for viewers to take away any personal messages they can relate to their own lives except that—in this case—hard work has led to the achievement of a goal. But

since most of us have had experiences contradicting this message, transferring Ali's successful story of dedication to ourselves is often not possible.



**Figure 2: Dedication Station (Muhammad Ali Center)**

Moreover, the Dedication Station, like all the stations, overloads the senses. No guide exists through its chaos except for the announced theme of “Dedication.” Sounds within this station and in adjacent stations assault visitors: someone hitting a punching bag; Howard Cosell’s voice commenting on an Ali fight; other voices, some representing quotes from the wall, some unintelligible; all the while, syncopated music of drums and cymbals continuously playing. Sights are similarly chaotic. The station is made up of a series of differently sized orange/brown and black panels—each panel combining different sized pictures, commentary, and quotes with sources (commentary and quotes distinguished by type) which force visitors’ eyes to shift again and again as sizes and typefaces change.



**Figure 3: Dedication Station (Miller)**

Competing with DEDICATION on the first panel is a larger-than-life image of young Ali (with jump rope) in sepia tones. Over the lower parts of the figure are boxes of text with white type on brown-orange background, with some lines longer than others. Here, and throughout this station, quotes are centered, bold-faced, and larger than the commentary that is always justified at the left; source information is right-justified below the quotes. Visitors see the identified words of Odessa Grady Clay, 1975/*I Am King*; Joe Martin/*Sports Illustrated*, September 25, 1961; Hunt Helm/*Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 14, 1997; Angelo Dundee, 1967/*Black Is Best: The Riddle of Cassius Clay*; Robert Lipsyte, 1967/*The Contender*, and so on. Both the quotations and the commentary are presented in short lines that suggest free verse, lending seriousness and status to what is being described.

Often the commentary and quotation supplement each other as in a short panel that follows an image of young Ali in mock argument demonstrates:

The young athlete had a tremendous appetite: on the amateur circuit “he would eat enough food for three or four other boys,” said Joe Martin. But he was particular about his diet and careful about his health.

**At Central High in those days, Clay was known as the kid who drank water with garlic, who drank milk with raw eggs, who wouldn’t smoke, who wouldn’t drink even carbonated soda pop, who ran and shadowboxed as often as he walked, who was very shy, especially around girls . . .”**

Hunt Helm,  
*Louisville Courier-Journal* September 14, 1997

In other cases, the quotation and the commentary don’t seem to match. At the same Dedication Station we see the following quote from Ali:

**“Champions are made from something they have deep inside them— a desire, a dream, a vision.”**

Muhammad Ali, 1975  
*The Greatest, My Own Story*

This quotation suggests that Ali believes that the dedication that makes champions comes from something intangible, from a “dream” within, and not from something the champion does; it’s that internal “desire” that makes him such an extraordinary individual. In contrast, the commentary that follows Ali’s quotation begins by suggesting the importance of hard work, “endless hours of practice,” as a means of making a champion.

Set your goal. Focus. Drive. Deliver. Dedication to a goal demands diligence, grinding effort and endless hours of practice. Visualize success. When you reach that goal, the thrill of your triumph will propel you to the next one.

*Champions aren’t made in gyms.*  
Championship springs from a glowing spark within—“from something deep inside.” Every single day effort pushes towards excellence, over obstacles, and through setbacks. Others can help you, but the achievement is your own.

“I’ve never fought anyone with a will so strong,” said Joe Frasier of Muhammad Ali. The young man with a dream became the Heavyweight Champion of the World—not once but three times. An achievement in the ring proved to be just the *first* dream to which Ali dedicated himself.

These short lines, with non-technical language very like Ali’s own quoted throughout MAC, identify first a kind of mental or imaginative effort (“Dedication to a goal”), then a physical effort (“grinding effort and



endless hours of practice”), then a return to the mental (“Visualize success.”), then a denial of the role of the physical (“*Champions aren’t made in gyms.*”), and finally a move from the voice of the anonymous commentator to the authoritative voice of boxer Joe Frasier who testifies to Ali’s strong will. But nothing in the panel acknowledges this back-and-forth development; readers are left to try to make sense of the relationships presented. Is the champion driven by something “deep inside” or by hard work, pushing “towards / excellence, over obstacles, and through / setbacks”? One or both? Under what conditions? The end of this panel, with Joe Frasier’s quote, returns to the idea of something intrinsic, “a will so /strong.” But the “will so /strong” that defines Ali also seems to limit those that he can influence through MAC. Do visitors inevitably have a “will so /strong” like Ali’s? And do no other factors matter in the achieving of dreams?



**Figure 4: Dedication Station (Shelter)**

The Dedication Station continues with panels filled with full and half-sized blocks of texts and photographs. At one point, visitors arrive at an

oversized screen with videos of the young boxer training; here, commentary competes with the always-present sounds. And then more panels, pictures, scripts, voices. The boxer *as he is presented here* is so energetic and active and engaging that visitors are unlikely to reflect on Ali's growth as an argument that they might embrace for themselves. And at least one panel—the third panel (from left) in Figure 4 above—discourages ideas about transformation with a confounding image. In a mock argument, Ali is apparently yelling and shaking his fist at what appears to be some kind of artificial construction in his other hand. Visitors can recognize the typical brashness represented by Ali's posture, where he seems to be competing "word-for-word" with the inanimate object he faces, but what is that object? Is it papier mâché? Foil? Paper? Is it art? A child's toy? A "doggie bag" from a restaurant? Some may see the photograph as incomprehensible and walk by; others may stand and try to make some sense of it, perhaps seeing in the picture an example of Ali's comic side, a self-parody. (A later photograph in the same station shows the young boxer jumping rope while looking at himself in the mirror, a pose which suggests he is acknowledging and making fun of the egotism attached to him.) But it's not clear here what visitors are to make of the "argument" photo, what it has to do with dedication, or whether they are even supposed to puzzle over it.

### On "Difficult" Subject Matter at MAC

MAC's exhibits end quietly, with a transition to the older Ali, displays of medals and honors he won for various social causes, leading to Ali holding the torch at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996. The curator intended this ending to emphasize Ali as a moral hero (Shaeffer-Nahmias), and it certainly does represent courage in spite of age and widely held respect in spite of/because of actions taken when healthy and when ill. The exhibit is also intended to cause visitors to look within:

[A]s visitors take hold of [individual Olympic ‘torches’], they will be amazed to find themselves on screen . . . a powerful . . . motivation to find purpose and strength in their own lives”—a reflection which, unfortunately, the technology does not currently support. Instead, Ali is our model here. Just as he found fulfillment, we’re told that “each of us . . . [can] reach our personal goal, discover greatness in ourselves, and become shining beacons of life” (MAC Presskit).

We were certainly moved, moved for what he has become and for what—in spite of age and Parkinson’s—he still represents. But neither of us was moved enough to change our lives. And comments left by other visitors suggest that we’re not the only ones who leave failing to embrace the “ideals of Muhammad Ali” and failing to be inspired “to be as great as [we] can be” (*MAC Find Greatness Within*) beyond any commitments we had prior to our visit.

While our analysis has, thus far, focused on design characteristics and the dominance of Ali’s mythic image, a third complication potentially makes transformation problematic for many visitors: Difficult subject matter is everywhere on display at MAC, though, again, visitors are rarely given time or space to think it over. The story of Ali indicts generations of Americans who have done little to alter the lives of young men and women unable to transcend poverty and discrimination the way Ali has done. According to Elizabeth Carnegie, difficult subject matter is an essential problem for museum designers because people do not like to engage with distasteful histories. For Carnegie, the museum experience is tied to memory. If the memories evoked by the displays, atmosphere, or artifacts are memories of turmoil, shame or conflict, then it is only



**Figure 5: Ali at the Atlanta Olympics (Muhammad Ali Center)**

reasonable that visitors are more likely to resist or reject their part in this narrative (80). The result, according to Marilyn Hood, is that visitors will “stay away” from certain kinds of museums if they feel the content is at odds with their desire for certain kinds of experiences (54). And those who do visit may simply “shut down” in response to difficult moments in their tour. To accommodate a tendency on the part of visitors to resist subjects that may implicate them in ongoing (rather than historical) inequities, museums will often focus on what Victoria Gallagher identifies as an educational mission in her analysis of The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. In this case, the teaching of history is meant to correspond with and support a *remembrance* function that “argues against forgetting the past” (312). The larger objective for such museums, according to Gallagher, is to balance the “pastness” of the injustice with its contemporary legacy so that visitors become educated about historical movements but also come to understand that the inequalities these movements challenged remain active in civil society.

As we have noted, one explicit goal at MAC is to see this process of education and remembrance embodied in the life of Muhammad Ali and to inspire visitors to learn from his experience how to battle social injustice. However, MAC's design makes it easy for visitors to displace racial tension back onto Ali and away from their own lives when exhibits define racial discrimination as one more hurdle overcome by the great man. He encounters racism growing up in segregated Louisville. He encounters it in his refusal of the draft and in his embracing of Islam. MAC's vision of Ali is so powerful and so purpose-driven that even the evils of pervasive, systemic racism could not hold him back. African-American visitors especially may have a unique connection to Ali's battle with racism as James Throgmorton discusses in "Inventing the Greatest." He tells a story about a young African American family who enters the lunch counter exhibit, ostensibly in the segregated Louisville of Ali's youth. The family hears a disembodied racist voice shout "Hey, what are you doing here?" When the children in the group ask their mother about the hostile voice at the lunch counter, she recounts some of the history of race relations in the city. Throgmorton explains that, while visiting the same exhibit, he felt a "twinge of fear and rejection" but nothing like the "embodied memory" that would have been evoked for the mother in this family (250).

Some visitor comments suggest the importance of the exhibitions, and of MAC more generally, for civil rights history and for those who still experience daily the effects of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls the invisible "grammar" of racism (1). One notable example describes Ali as "the Black Inspiration":

To the Ali Center-Thanks for honoring Ali-----the Black Inspiration for our youth and race. He never gave up when he was fighting in the ring and he hasn't given up now. God blessings to Ali & his family. (Muhammad Ali Center Visitor Book)

Other comments celebrate Ali's role in the history of civil rights and the educational value of learning "how things were" when Ali was breaking down racial barriers. But moving these racial dynamics to the present is an altogether different proposition, particularly for white visitors. Within African American and other non-white communities, this discourse is active and vibrant. However, an implicit goal of MAC is to make this problem of ongoing discrimination and inequality one that we *all* acknowledge and work to solve. Hinging the struggle for change to a larger-than-life Ali—who, we say to ourselves, battled racists rather than systemic racism (in which we are all complicit)—makes it too easy for even sympathetic visitors to reject their complicity or to avoid altogether an encounter with exhibits that prompt a powerful remembrance.

While race is the most prominent difficult subject on display, a second challenge haunts MAC's narrative: the experience of living with illness—in Ali's case, Parkinson's disease. This disease, which we have seen dramatically reduce Ali's physical and verbal capacities, is generally depicted as one more hurdle for Ali to overcome. While his struggle is admirable and inspiring, minimizing its influence on his life again perpetuates the cycle by which visitors may dissociate the ill/authentic Ali from the mythic Ali. The result is that lessons about illness and our attitudes about illness go un-interrogated. This displacement of illness from the dominant narrative of the Center is perhaps most notable in marketing materials produced for MAC.

For example, during a 2012 rebranding campaign a temporary landing page posted on the MAC homepage depicts an aged Ali in his fighter's stance, still vigorous and engaged despite the illness that has long disabled

him.<sup>4</sup> The accompanying text reads, “Now My Life Is Really Starting,” implying that this Ali is different. He is embracing his role as humanitarian, he is leaving behind the celebrity tied to his sporting achievements, and he is courageously battling Parkinson’s disease. This “new” Ali is pictured through a dark photo of the aging man in a stance that echoes the brash and youthful boxer he was in the past. This engaging image succeeds in appealing to our fascination with Ali but undermines how we might value or understand him now. After all, the “new” Ali—the hero, the myth—is a much easier pill to swallow as he saves us having to consider our assumptions about illness, as well as our own inevitable encounters with age and decline.

For most of our time in MAC, we experience *his* exciting and attractive story—the man who boxed with “speed and grace” and who spoke with cleverness and wit; the man who was refused service in a Louisville diner after he returned with Olympic Gold; the man who articulately argued against induction into a “war of domination of slave masters over the darker people of the earth” (MAC); the man whose civil protest caused him to be stripped of his title; the man who became known by superlatives: the “Athlete of the Century,” the “Sportsman of the Century,” the “Sports Personality of the Century,” the “World Sportsman of the Century.” We enjoy seeing his most popular moves, reliving his greatest battles, and finding him translated into art. The energy, the poetry, the articulateness, the ethics and the achievements of that larger-than-life Ali are indisputable. It is because he dominates the Center visually and vocally that the diminished and diseased Ali who defines the last exhibits is dramatic in its difference. Unfortunately, both versions of the man seem

<sup>4</sup> Due to branding conflicts, the Muhammad Ali Center did not grant permission to publish this image.

to undercut the broader purpose of the Center: the larger-than-life Ali makes any ethical or moral journeys we might take in imitation of him seem trivial, while the diminished Ali makes them uninviting.

## Conclusions

Ultimately, MAC's design choices result in a failure to achieve larger objectives tied to personal and social change. While these sorts of failures are not uncommon and do not apply to all visitors equally, we think they merit particular attention given the important goals that the facility has set for itself. Museums—like schools—are among the few places where large numbers of citizens come into contact with complex and sometimes difficult subject matter in a context that is meant to promote reflection and transformation.

We have offered this critique of MAC for two reasons. First, we lament the lost opportunity to generate conversation (if not change) related to issues of social justice, community activism, and human equality. Second, we feel that increased attention to how design of museum messages can undermine their rhetorical value might contribute to a larger conversation about refining and reinforcing such messages in other contexts, and particularly in settings where peace, justice, and equality are at the heart of a museum's mission. In fact, and quite separate from this analysis, MAC has undertaken a rebranding initiative that suggests it has arrived at similar conclusions about the failure of its message to reach more. Beginning with the hiring of new CEO Donald Lassere in 2012 and followed by a revised marketing campaign, MAC has fundamentally shifted its public ethos from Ali to Ali's values. The new site and logo remove the heroic image of Ali and replace him with the silhouette of a butterfly (see below), a simple reference to one of Ali's great lines.





**Figure 7: New MAC Site (<https://alicenter.org>)**

When Ali does appear in this new documentation, it is the contemporary Ali rather than the brash young fighter. This is a man more like us; he struggles and he fights, but he does not always win. The butterfly logo evokes Ali in his prime, of course, but it also redirects the attention of visitors from Ali’s sporting life to the philanthropic goals of the center, particularly those focused on transforming young people with revised MAC programming emphasizing four core themes: education, gender equality, global citizenship, and youth leadership through the Generation Ali program (Frassica).

While Ali remains a draw to the Center, the facility is now operating as two distinct but related spaces: a museum of Ali history and “an incubator for national and global change” (Frassica). This dual mission has taken on an added importance in the wake of Ali’s passing in June 2016. The Center must now do the work of maintaining both mission *and* memory. And while Ali’s core values are still central, MAC, in its latest incarnation, calls on us to “Be Great” and to “Do Great Things,”

suggesting we are no longer meant to passively live, walk, and talk in Ali's imposing footsteps (footsteps we could never hope to fill). Instead, we are challenged to "be" and to "do" things that we define as "great." MAC takes as its revised mission "helping people reach their personal goals" and "the betterment of the community around them" (Graham). We are still meant to transform—to redefine our own lives—but Ali's story is a demonstration, an example, rather than a template. Our values will be contingent on our own social, political, or spiritual interests; they will be designed with and for our own communities. We are now simply encouraged to be "great" in our actions, not to be "the greatest."

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