



Illustration by Clair Ronan

You go down there looking for justice, that's what you find, just us.

Richard Pryor

For whoever is least among you all is the one who is great.

Luke 9:48

Monument for the People of Columbus, Ohio, proposes an oval-shaped, stone platform placed on the south plaza to the former main entrance of Columbus City Hall. Its overall dimensions are 36 inches high x 22 feet wide by x 14 feet deep, with a 42-inch-wide ramp spiraling up to its top. The 28-inch-high letters carved into the stone face read, JUST US.

The width of the *Monument for the People of Columbus, Ohio*, equals in measure the 22-foot height of the statue of Christopher Columbus recently removed from here. In place of the bronze figure, the stone platform offers Columbus residents a place to assemble, to be seen and heard at our city hall. This past summer's widespread protests supporting racial and social justice, and the record-smashing turnout of voters in the recent presidential election, have demonstrated to all that the exercise of democracy isn't the work of politicians only, it's *our* work—as equal citizens. And if democracy is, like justice, a process not a state, then our work is unending. *Monument for the People of Columbus, Ohio*, renders a site for rising up and taking up the task remaining before us.

Writings by African American poet and essayist, Claudia Rankine, inspired me. *Just Us: An American Conversation*, is her latest book. The conversation is about whiteness in America. It offers no easy or comfortable or optional exchange. Rankine begins with a poem, titled, “what if,” insisting that:

. . . I am here, without the shrug,
attempting to understand how what I want
and what I want from you run parallel—

justice and the openings for just us.

Monument for the People of Columbus, Ohio, asks that we accept Rankine’s invitation to show up and, as the late Congressman John Lewis put it, “make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.” The monument’s raised, elliptical pedestal is not a symbol. No historical effigy or mythical allegory stands on top of it. Instead, my proposal speculates a platform for coming together to stand as one body politic in all our human diversity—equally present, equally vocal, equally recognized. Just us. All of us.

Michael Mercil
20 November 2020