

Before The Law

Public sculpture is a great challenge for any artist. The work must appeal to an extraordinary range of people of diverse opinions on art and its public role. English sculptor John Atkin's recent project entitled Access to Justice took four years of meetings and many visual concepts in the making before the Law Society of Upper Canada selected his sculpture for a "prime location bridging Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square and University Avenue, via the pedestrianized promenade of McMurtry Gardens of Justice."

Ian Findlay

World Sculpture News: What were the most important and the trickiest aspects in the negotiations for Access to Justice? And were there times when you thought the project might not happen?

John Atkin: There were numerous occasions I thought this project might not happen. Working on such a prescribed brief was a challenge and looking for ways that my studio practice might stimulate ideas was problematic. I also had the task of identifying a suitable fabricator to work with on the production of the sculpture. This was an element of the project I looked forward to resolving with Toronto Art Restoration who the Search Committee used to validate the durability and quality of materials used in the fabrication

of commissioned projects. Toronto Art Restoration were concerned about the ambitious combination of materials I wanted to use in making the sculpture—polished stainless steel, painted steel, and Corten steel. There were potential galvanic corrosion issues with combining different metals. To address these questions I used the expertise of Mike Bilyk (director of Lafontaine Iron Werks Inc, who fabricated the artwork) as well as the British Stainless Steel Advisory Service.

I'd also used these materials in other sculptures so I was confident that with carefully located gaskets there would be no issues of galvanic corrosion. This in itself was a long process and one that required evidence-based research. All the materials were sourced in Canada, and

the sculpture was made in Canada. None of the Search Committee were specialists at working with sculpture. [The committee/broker] part of the infrastructure was missing and therefore communication and understanding could become "lost in translation" at different times in the process. In the end I wasn't required to alter any part of the sculpture.

Did you apply for the project or were you ask to submit a proposal?

I was approached to do the commission. Representatives of the Law Society of Upper Canada got in touch with me five years ago about this project. They had compiled a list of ten artists who were mostly based in Canada and the USA to



Access to Justice, overlooking Law Society of Upper Canada (left) and a view from Law Society onto old city hall (right). All photographs: Courtesy of the Artist.

participate in this project for McMurtry Gardens of Justice in Toronto. They had seen evidence of my own output and noted how I was able to respond creatively to heritage and historical prerequisites of a brief. The Search Committee invited me to Toronto to discuss the project further and explore the spaces available for concept ideas. The Search Committee, acting on behalf of the Law Society of Upper Canada, wanted the artwork to articulate an aspect of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which turned out to be quite a challenge. However, Canadian Law and English Law have close parallels, and the Charter contained a tenet "Access to Justice" which appealed to me.

In any one year I might work on a maximum of three projects, and the rest of my time is based in the studio working on new ideas that underpin my studio-focused research activities. I've been involved in a number of projects in China over the past ten years, where in 2008 my seminal artwork *Strange Meeting* was selected from 2,600 worldwide applicants to be located in Olympic Park.

What were the major aesthetic challenges for you in realizing this work? Are there any sculptors who may have inspired or influenced your work here?

I was familiar with the work of a number of artists whose work on one level explored ideas of gateways and vistas, but it was the work of Jacques Moeschal (1913–2004) and his unrealized *Project pour le Rond-Point*, Schumann, Brussels, that became a catalyst for developing a series of models and drawings exploring the ideas of gateways and doorways.

Given the sheer volume of news and reporting focusing on global migration I thought it would be interesting to link contemporary global events to Canada's historic tradition of welcoming people from all parts of the globe into their society. Canada has what is described as a "tapestry of cultures" as opposed to the "melting pot" associated with the USA. The distinct difference in the objectives of Canadian culture is to weave people from different backgrounds

into the culture of being Canadian.

Over the next few years, I embarked on a series of ideas for spaces in McMurtry Gardens of Justice, which were submitted to the Search Committee—and duly rejected. I then started to consider the notion of passageways and journeys. The way migrants would need to pass through gateways, and that from their individual perspective the goal of reaching Canada would have presented itself as a glimpse onto and into Canadian society. Passing through the obstacles that lead to citizenship and assimilation is a test of perseverance.

Did you discard a lot of concepts? If so, what were the reasons?

I worked on a number of different ideas for different aspects of the Canadian Charter of Right and Freedoms, such as equality before the law, the rule of law, etc. I made designs for these different concepts, but the Search Committee rejected all of them. This whole process took nearly three years, during which time I also worked on other projects. A result of this was that alternative ideas occurred to me. However, I was constantly drawn to the access to justice theme not least because of the media coverage about the plight of migrants. My studio practice had begun to explore the notion of barriers and obstacles as part of the formal vocabulary of my two- and 3-D ideas.

How many other sculptors were up for this project?

The Search Committee identified twelve sculptors, mostly from North America (including Canada) to participate in this project. We all met in Toronto and were given a guided tour of the site. Some well-known Canadian sculptors were invited, such as Eldon Garnet, Marlene Hilton Moore, and John Greer. The brief was to examine ways that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms could be articulated into sculpture without recourse to utilizing text. In the end only a few members of the this original group were able to articulate the challenges of

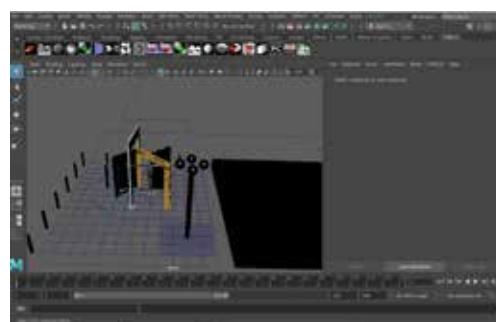
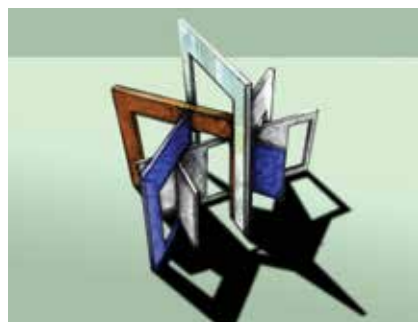
the brief creatively, so only five sculptors finished up making six artworks for the McMurtry Gardens of Justice space: Marlene made two sculptures.

The geometry of Access to Justice seems a little stiff and cold to me. It strikes me a puzzle that one walks around and into and through—as you mentioned in the press release—but one never seems to ever be part of it. Was there some kind of restriction on the geometry and the overall abstract narrative?

My experience as a traveler gaining access to different countries worldwide is that Customs clearances are necessarily "stiff and cold." [Even] living in your own country, like here in the UK, an open democratic society, can be challenging in terms of gaining equality and fairness. Being an immigrant is even more challenging. Even UK citizens from the Caribbean who have lived in the UK since the late 1950s have very recently been challenged by the UK Government to prove their right to live in the UK. The *Windrush* scandal has tarnished the reputation of the UK and was (ab)used as a convenient metric to blight the lives of Commonwealth Citizens. Fortunately, this has been championed as a human rights issue and the Government has been forced to reverse the hostile environment created by its abuse of the UK immigration system.

I have watched people interact with the sculpture. It is heartening to see how they move through and into the work as opposed to standing outside of the artwork and viewing it, which is the case with many examples of outdoor artworks.

In many ways *Access to Justice* is an opportunity to observe the interaction of people congregating around one place, in much the same way you might watch people in a busy plaza space. Except that with *Access to Justice* the interaction is with an object—an installation artwork—where the participants become performers within a specifically designed environment. Their interaction is unscripted, except that there are spaces to hide and portals to walk through. For migrants passing through ports of



Access to Justice, drawing, scale model, and CAD modelling.

entry, doorways to a fresh life: portals are an opportunity to reflect on their past history, the future, and their place within it.

With Alberto Giacometti's *City Square* (*La Place*, 1948) there is a similar concentration on people interacting within a pre-determined space. However, with Giacometti there is a disassociation between the figures, whereas with *Access to Justice* there is connection.

There were no restrictions relating to the geometry of the piece and none relating to the abstract narrative. The *Access to Justice* doorways are open or ajar, never closed. The doorways make spaces within my sculpture that are concealed, safe spaces. At the same time as providing shelter, they chart fresh perspectives onto the buildings that enshrine the justice system.

Why not something flowing and lyrical that suggests one might be a part of Justice? Was there something against figuration as part of the sculpture? I am not sure, even with the clear sightline of their own perspective of the Law Courts, whether one might think about equal access to the justice system even with no restrictions of gates or walls.

All of the selected artists produced figurative artworks for the space, and mine was the only "abstract" artwork, although merely describing it as abstract somewhat negates the references to doorways and portals, which by their nature are abstract. Artists such as Mondrian were fascinated by nature but reduced their interpretation of nature to pure geometric form. Another artist inspired by landscape, Richard Diebenkorn produced paintings such as *Ocean Park* that condensed the forms of nature into geometric planes. It wouldn't have been possible for me to produce a figurative artwork simply because that's not what I do now, and what I do (even though it is public art) is born out of a rigorous studio practice and not design metrics.

I understand what you are saying about the reflecting qualities of steel in which the image of all people may be captured. I think that the architectural narrative overwhelms the idea of all people with access to the law. I would love to have seen some figurative element, even if this spoke to more traditional sculpture.

It's important to appreciate that the architectural narrative of the artwork relates to intersecting doorways and portals. Laws intersect and crossover as well! They might also reference the modernistic architecture that features strongly in Downtown Toronto, but that is a bi-product of the



John Atkin, *Access of Justice*, 2018, a panorama view.

process and placement of the installation.

The doorways and portals I reference are "overwhelming" simply because the pathway to gain citizenship is overwhelming—witness so much that is reported in the media about migrants, and then consider the issues that many of them have in gaining citizenship whilst at the same time avoiding xenophobia peddled by far-right groups. So, you are correct to use the adjective "overwhelming" because that is core to identifying the nuances of ideas that operate within the framework of this artwork. You have to remember this idea (*Access to Justice*) was put to the Search Panel Committee and they got the idea without having to be spoon-fed the rationale, which I take to be a success in terms of my sculptures ability to discreetly embed ideas that allow a viewer to unwrap layers of meaning over a time.

Might not the colors have been less conservative? Perhaps using those discreet flags of the First Nation peoples, and others?

Another artist might have used a different approach to the use of color (interestingly none did; I was the only one to use color.) Color was largely governed by the inherent quality of the materials and their capacity to articulate ideas relating to the core principles of *Access to Justice*, made from a combination of polished stainless steel, painted steel, and Corten steel.

The key reason for using three materials is to make visible the concept of difference and how it can also result in (visual) harmony. The polished stainless steel reflects the architectural surroundings as well as the color and vibrancy of the busy everyday activity characterized by this space. The stainless steel is also a symbol for renewal and optimism, which was (and is) the driving force for so much

migration to Canada. Stainless steel is a light-reflecting neutral material: its surfaces capture the reflections of all nationalities into the various planes of the artwork: thereby suggesting equality before the law and empowering all nationalities' access to the rule of law.

The Corten steel is a sealed, rust-cultured surface—symbolic of the past, as well as legacy-defining industries representing notions of human endeavor. Corten steel oxidizes to a bespoke hue of red depending on the atmospheric conditions in which it is located. The conjoining of the two metals bridges the old and the new. The use of the blue in this installation is also important as it creates visual links to the Canadian Lakes, which are integral to Canadian identity.

A visitor to McMurtry Gardens of Justice will note that my sculpture is conspicuous because of its color within the promenade space of McMurtry Gardens of Justice. As well as the blue referencing the Great Lakes, it also suggests seaborne maritime routes that generations of migrants will have used to find their way to Canada.

It is important to remember that Canadian society in the 19th century moved from agriculture to manufacturing; hence my use of Corten steel reflects the importance of industry in building society and developing the economy. The trio of materials for my sculpture is completed by stainless steel.

Canada is historically a major producer of nickel ore through its mining industry, and nickel ore is a key component of stainless steel. The polished surfaces of the stainless steel in *Access to Justice* reflect the architectural surroundings of Downtown Toronto as well as absorbing the color of the day, capturing the environment, and reflecting back onto the gaze of visitors to McMurtry Gardens of Justice. ▲