

Arguments over art in architecture, and the ratio of one to the other, are largely irrelevant, says sculptor Keith McCarter. Report by Louise Rogers. Portrait photograph by David Banks.

# PUBLIC ART'S PRIVATE FACE

Let us suppose that you have just been asked to produce a scheme which will positively enhance the DOE's Marsham Street headquarters in London. What would you do?

Bulldozers and high-powered explosives are out of the question and you are at a turning-point in your career, so this commission could either launch or sink you. There can be few more daunting prospects and it's safe to say that only the very brave or very stupid would attempt such a commission.

Now meet the man who took on the job. Keith McCarter is a sculptor who specialises in architecturally related work. It is 16 years since he and landscape architect Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe took on that extraordinary commission, and it's quite clear he survived the experience amazingly well. True, he had some help, as, apart from some earlier concrete panel designs which were used, the designs were scrapped.

McCarter has never had to be burdened with the reputation as the man responsible for the DOE's public image. This was due to the artistic vision of the then environment secretary Geoffrey Rippon in 1973 who decided that the only enhancement needed for the building was not a comprehensive and imaginative landscaping scheme but a single cherry tree—and that's exactly what it got.

## A name in bronze and steel

Since that time McCarter has made himself an impressive name in the world of sculpture from his bronze and stainless steel abstract sculptures which enhance some 30 buildings in this country as well as others in the US, Europe and Africa. His most recently completed piece now resides outside the Great Eastern Enterprises building on the Isle of Dogs, which will be joined shortly by three others placed outside different buildings in the same area of Docklands.

He is also working on his most ambitious project yet, for what he describes as his dream commission, again with Jellicoe.

At the age of 89, it is extremely doubtful that Jellicoe will ever see the completion of the £100 million Moody Garden scheme, planned to transform 12 hectares of Galveston island off the coast of Texas in the Gulf of Mexico. The scheme will provide a history of gardening throughout the world, with

three of the central sections designed exclusively by Jellicoe. Two major sculptures representing Poseidon and Demeter will be designed and made by McCarter.

McCarter describes the total scheme as a kind of thinking man's Disneyland.

## Three dimensions

Born in Scotland in 1936, McCarter graduated with a degree in three-dimensional design from Edinburgh College of Art and then worked as a glass-designer in the US. It was at this stage that he began to experiment with construction materials in sculpture, although his obvious love and deep-rooted interest in architecture had emerged long before this, when he had been undecided as to whether to take three-dimensional design or architecture at college.

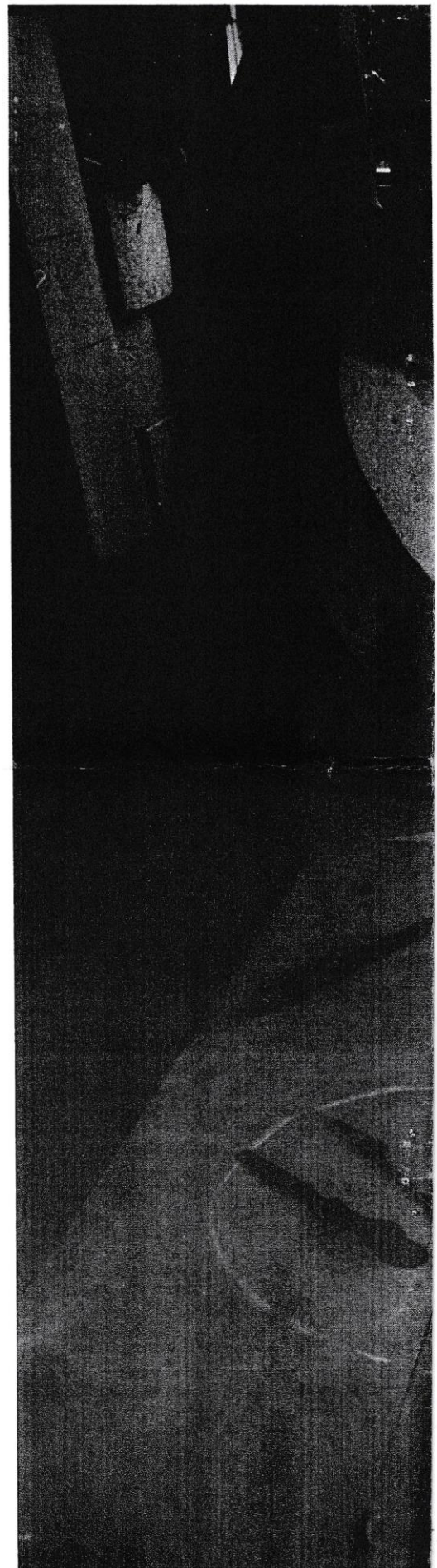
It was not until 1965 that he received his first architectural commission for a precast concrete mural for St Botolphs House, Houndsditch. It was 13 years later that he was first able to transform some of his ideas into bronze with the encouragement of Henry Moore. Two exhibitions followed, one in Burleighfield, and one showing at the international exposition in Monaco.

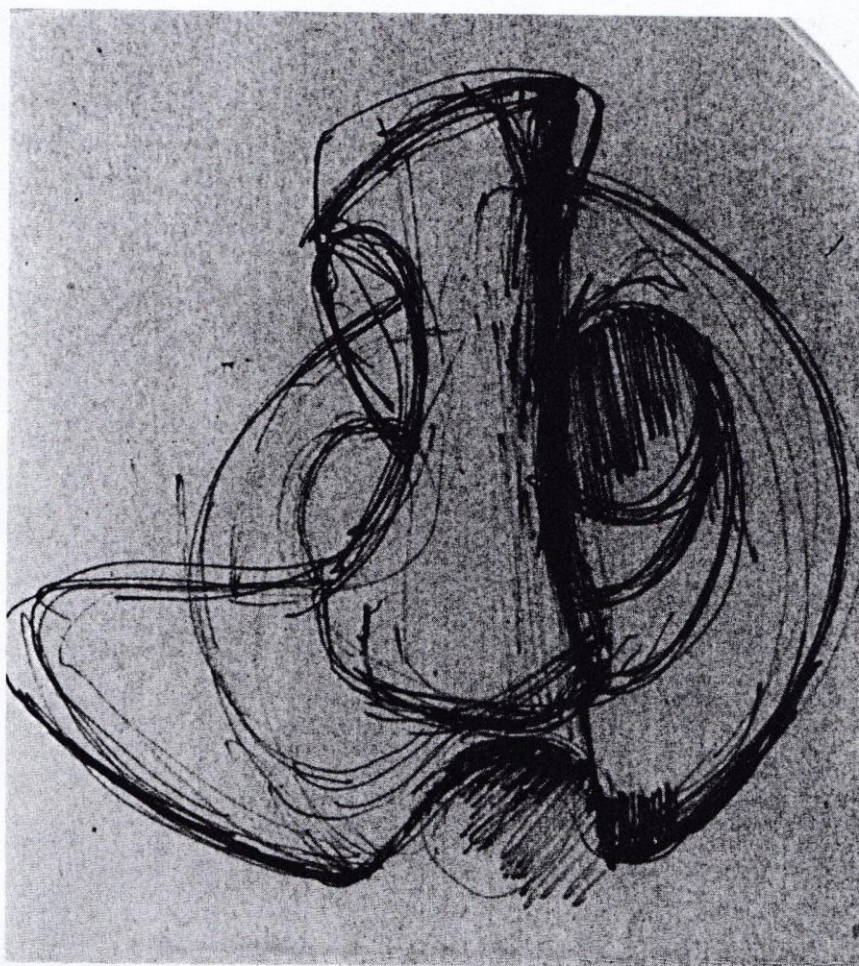
Then, as now, McCarter was fighting what he sees as an intrinsic prejudice about the place of art in architecture as well as its value in our culture.

The argument that as influential guardians of the environment, architects should give more consideration to their role in the provision of public art is not a new one. It is, however, one that has not yet been successfully answered.

It is a subject that is obviously very close to McCarter's heart and not only because it provides him with his livelihood. McCarter is convinced that there is what he describes as a great visual void in our culture which has its roots in the educational system and in our attitude towards the artistically creative mind. This he says is most evident later on in professions which by their nature should be encouraging the very essence of the visual arts.

Architecture, McCarter stresses, is a case in point. 'I find it very depressing that with so many architects, they seem to lack the role of encouraging the inclusion of art in architecture,' he says. 'They see their profession purely as a business, and concentrate primarily on profit margins and how to get through





everyone he meets aware of the importance of art in architecture. Regardless of whether or not you enjoy the sculptures he creates, his argument is one which cuts through the current debate on per cent for art.

He does not agree with the notion that every public building needs that sort of prescribed artistic intervention or that in many cases a predetermined per cent of total cost would be enough. Instead he believes it is matter of scale and of individual circumstance.

The question of scale is a fundamental one to his work and he insists that even good-quality work is useless if the scale is wrong. It is because of this—as well as the close link which he tries to forge with the building he is working on—that he is much happier if he is commissioned early on in the building's conception. This enables him to get to know and understand the architect and developer.

McCarter grew up on a diet of Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and other architects fed on the stark idealism of the Modern Movement, and the same almost obsessive search for the essential form is apparent in much of his work.

Comparisons of his work with that of Henry Moore are understandable, but McCarter insists that others such as Michelangelo and Rodin have influenced him much more. He accepts the organic similarities between his own and Moore's work but points towards Moore's use of the human figure, while his own sculpture is influenced more by music and humanistic elements.

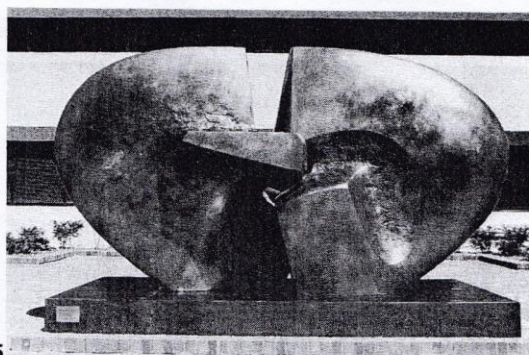
#### The art of salesmanship

He fights vehemently against the traditional idea of art imprisoned in the confines of an art gallery and is equally opposed to the small secular world of the art dealer, many of whom he insists would be as much at home selling cars.

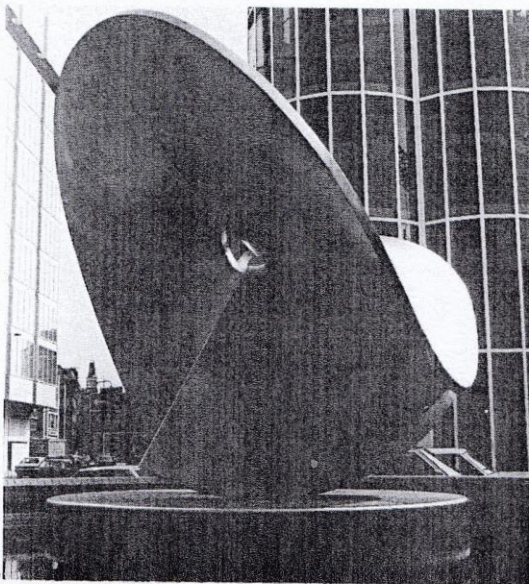
There are now approximately 1200 graduates in fine art leaving college every year. The number is set to dwindle as the pressures of decreasing student numbers, the introduction of student loans and the new customer-oriented Government policy on education takes hold. McCarter has found a niche which should give encouragement to all those striving to make it in the competitive world of pure art.

Yet in reality there are those who maintain artistic provision is an addition or even an unnecessary extra in architecture. This ensures that McCarter, despite his now well-established reputation, still has to almost bully architects and developers into considering its inclusion. He rings up architects and asks them if they agree with art in architecture; nine out of 10 say they do. Then he asks them when was the last time they included a commission in a scheme—that's when the excuses start.

Keith McCarter is a man who dreams of a renaissance; not of the ornate, hedonistic variety but of the pure and simple kind where art is more than a question of decoration. ■



- 1 'Embrace', 123 Park Road, Regents Park, London.
- 2 'Interlace', Evelyn Gardens, Chelsea, London.
- 3 Working sketch for 'Poseidon', planned for the Moody Gardens scheme, Galveston island.
- 4 'Oracle', to be sited at Vogans Mill, Docklands.
- 5 'Covenant', for Royal Executive Park, Rye, New York.
- 6 'Judex', Goodmans Yard, The Minories, City of London.



## FEATURE

the planning regulations. . . it seems to have nothing to do with affecting people's lives.' He sums up his strong belief with a quote from Alexander Pope: 'Their minds were full of feathers and their hearts full of lead.'

He says he is aware of the tremendous pressures on architects today but finds the 'If I don't do it then someone else will' attitude both deceitful and unconvincing.

The argument that architects are now in tune with giving the public what it wants rather than what they want to give the public, doesn't cut any ice with him. He blames what he sees as the public's low visual awareness on a system which encourages artistic talent in the very first years of schooling only to relegate it later on in the educational system to a less important sphere than other types of artistic expression such as written language or music. He should know—he has had two stints as a visiting lecturer.

### The widening gulf

McCarter's hard line on architects and developers alike is not as uncompromising as it first seems. He says that in his 24 years of working alongside these types of professionals he has noticed a clear and widening split between the good and the bad.

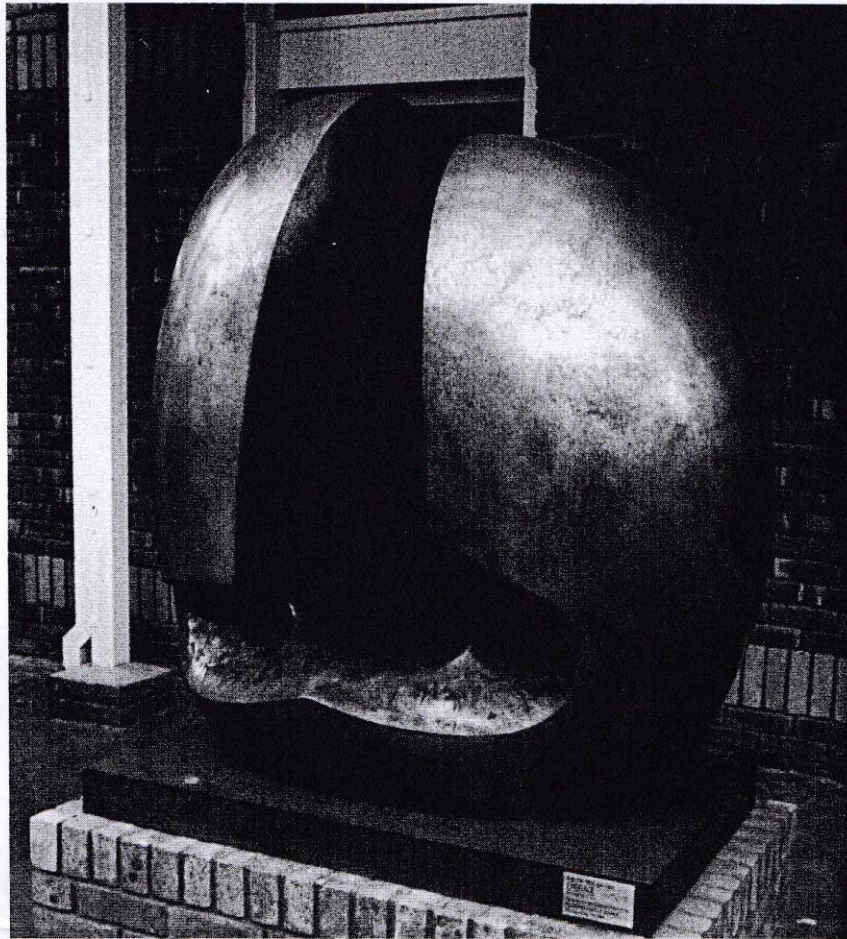
'I have been totally impressed when talking to some architects; people who are so dedicated to their discipline and have an attitude of mind which is very stimulating.' Michael Squire and Hilary Halpern are two architects who McCarter cites as being professionals with a true understanding of the complex responsibilities of those who design for the built environment.

He worked with Halpern on New City Court at Guy's Hospital and No 100 Piccadilly and is currently working with Squire on a design for a mixed development called Vogans Mill in Surrey Docks.

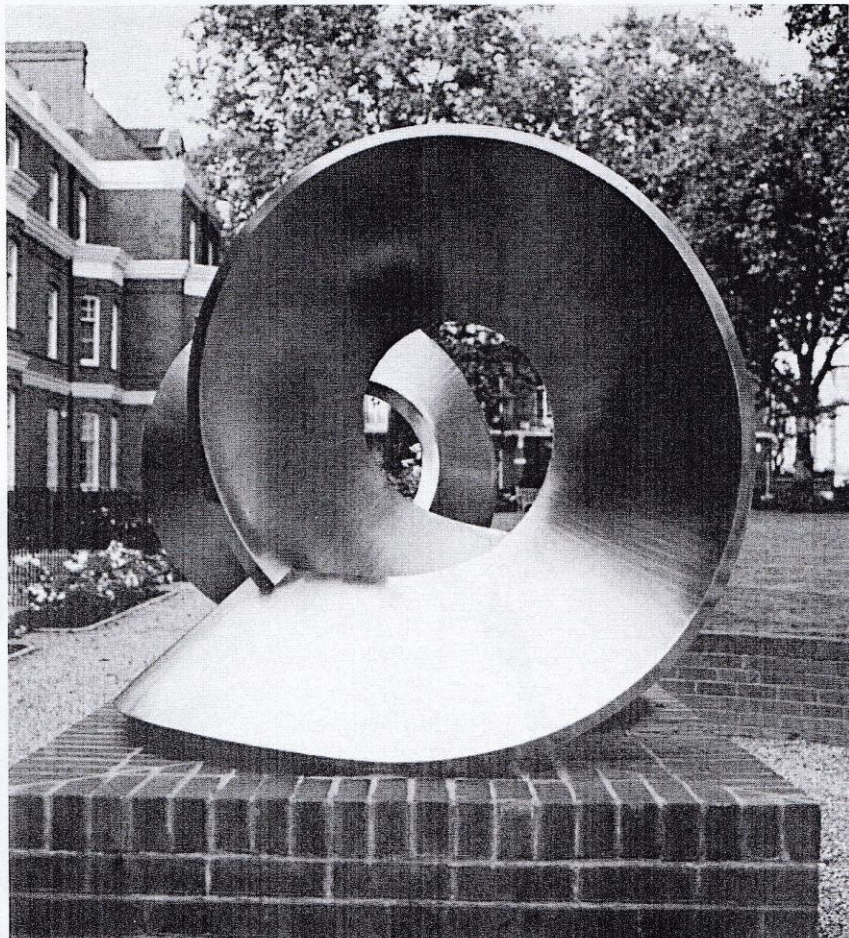
Neither does McCarter agree with the age-old myth of the greedy developer and the compromised architect. He has been commissioned by both and says he would find it difficult to say from which side of the coin he has received most support. He names two developers, Ian Rowberry of Rosehaugh Co Partnership and Stephen Wingate of the Development and Realisation Trust, as men with a clear understanding of the importance of public art.

He denies that the current lack of art as an integral component in the majority of developments is due to hard-pressed budgets. It is, he says, a matter of attitude. Those who see the value of art as something other than a clever investment do not balk at paying the £50 000 it would cost to commission a human-scale piece from him. 'Those who recoil,' he says, 'are not those who really want it in the first place.'

McCarter has been described as the archetypal perennial student. It's a description which suits him and his apparently untiring drive to make



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