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<https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/moore-usa/>

Citation (Chicago):

Potts, Alex. "Henry Moore's Public Sculpture in the US: The Collaborations with I. M. Pei." In *British Art Studies: British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000* (Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth). London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2016. <https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/moore-usa/>.

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Renewing the New: British Sculpture in the 1980s

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Citation (Chicago):

Hilty, Greg. "Renewing the New: British Sculpture in the 1980s." In *British Art Studies: British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000* (Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth). London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2016. <https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/1980s/>.

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Henry Moore's Public Sculpture in the US: The Collaborations with I. M. Pei

Article by **Alex Potts**



Abstract

The many commissions Henry Moore received for public sculpture in the United States provided the occasion for several quite distinctive works. While not site specific, these were unique, and their final form, scale, and disposition was elaborated with a particular setting in mind. This aspect of Moore's work in the US, which began with the monumental piece he designed for the Lincoln Center in New York in 1963–65, is examined here by focusing on the productive relationship he forged with the architect I. M. Pei in the 1970s. The sculptures Moore produced in collaboration with Pei respond in suggestive ways to the spatial environments created in American cities by late modern architectural developments. They also realize an oddly effective combination of the biomorphic and abstract that differs both from the bodily conception of Moore's earlier work and the non-figurative character of much public sculpture of the time.

The many commissions Henry Moore received for public sculpture in the United States provided the occasion for several quite distinctive works. While not site specific, these were unique, and their final form, scale, and disposition was elaborated with a particular setting in mind. While the basic idea may have been taken from a smaller, independently conceived prototype, the final sculpture was not, as was habitually the case with Moore, simply a cast of a previously enlarged work. This aspect of Moore's work in the US, which began with the monumental piece he designed for the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York in 1963–65, is examined here by focusing on the particularly productive relationship he subsequently forged with the architect I. M. Pei (b. 1917). The sculptures Moore produced in collaboration with Pei respond in suggestive ways to the distinctive spatial environments created in American cities by late modern architectural developments. They also realize an oddly intriguing and effective combination of the biomorphic and abstract that differs from the more overtly bodily conception of Moore's earlier work, and they depart from the familiar reclining format he adopted for many of his large-scale pieces.

Having established a major international reputation in the immediate postwar period, Moore was in a good position to benefit from the significant expansion of commissions for modern sculpture to embellish the plazas and public spaces created by the wave of corporate and civic urban

redevelopment that got underway in the 1960s.¹ While many of his earliest public commissions were realized in the UK, it was the US which provided the real opportunity for work in this later, less civic-minded, vein—work which was not regarded as having an identifiable public significance beyond its aesthetic value as exemplary modern art, adding lustre and variety to a space that might otherwise be seen as a little austere and impersonal. There was far more money for this kind of work in the US than in the UK. At the same time, the general cultural context was much more favourably disposed to schemes for publicly sited works of sculpture, as evidenced, for example, by the National Endowment for the Arts *Art in Public Places* programme that got underway in 1967, alongside a number of other more local art and architecture initiatives. Both corporate and government funding and encouragement played a role, aided by a typically American pattern of patronage whereby private individuals and private grant-giving foundations would provide backing to finance artistic embellishments for high-end architectural developments. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Moore was securely locked into this system, partly aided by the connections he established with architects such as Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and I. M. Pei. He was also seen by many of the corporate and government sponsors of such projects as an exemplary, safely established European modern master, whose work would bring artistic aura to the sites for which his work was commissioned; and as having a status in this respect rather like earlier modern masters such as Picasso and Miró, who were also called upon to fulfil such projects. This was true, despite the fact that more avant-garde-minded American critics were becoming critical of what they saw as Moore's monumental, safe sculptural modernism and were promoting newer, more evidently radical, and American-based rather than European, forms of sculptural experimentation. Well into the late 1970s and early 1980s, Moore remained an artist of choice among those responsible in America for sponsoring and commissioning high-end public sculpture, even as art world pundits tended to dismiss his work as retardataire, blue-chip modernism.

Starting in the late 1960s, Moore's approach to making public sculpture underwent a significant change, partly in response to the changing nature of commissions of this kind, particularly marked in the US where he had his major patronage base. While often seen as marking a decline to a less hands-on approach, this shift nevertheless marked a new departure of some note as Moore engaged with the possibilities of public sculpture in a world now very different from the one in which he had first made his international reputation. Producing work whose scale and form would hold its own in the architectural environments of late modernism, he adopted a smoother, less heavily worked look, and began using light-weight polystyrene rather than plaster to fashion the models for his largest creations. The residues of studio touch that his earlier bronzes sought to retain largely disappeared, and the work took on a more evidently fabricated appearance.² He produced radical enlargements of ideas he had worked out on a small hand-held scale, and at times toyed with a lightness of touch and humour that echoes the general departure at the time from the heavy seriousness of much postwar modernism.

Moore fulfilled many of his public commissions by having a patron choose an idea already realized as a large-scale sculpture and then arranging for another bronze cast to be made—usually by the Noack foundry in Berlin, but also by Singer in Basingstoke for a few of the very largest works. Occasionally, however, as in his collaborations with I. M. Pei, the enlargement of an earlier smaller-scale work was undertaken in response to a particular commission. Pei would not just be involved in choosing an appropriate prototype from Moore's stock, but would also consult with Moore over the enlargement and its suitability to its destined architectural setting—in this way making these works, for all their autonomously generated basic shape, responsive to

their site. This procedure took a little time to evolve. In his earliest work for a building by Pei, the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, completed in 1968, the conception is quite conventional. A cast of an existing work, *Two Piece Reclining Figure No. 3* (1961), was commissioned and placed in front of the entrance. A little over life-size, so not that large, there was nothing about the sculpture particularly keyed to its role as a feature enhancing the approach to a public art gallery.

Moore's *Large Arch* in Columbus, Indiana, was rather different (fig. 1). Set in an open plaza bordered by three important buildings—Pei's Cleo Rogers Memorial Library completed in 1971, Eliel Saarinen's First Christian Church dating from 1942, and a traditional local mansion created in the early years of the twentieth century for a wealthy Indiana banker—the work by Moore was very much commissioned with the site in mind. The initiative apparently came from Pei, who wanted "a large sculpture which would anchor the space and bring the buildings together"³ and also complement his modestly scaled, low-slung modernist library. As with most high-profile public sculpture of this kind in the US, the funding came from a private patron, in this case the wealthy local industrialist J. Irwin Miller. He had set up the foundation that covered the cost of commissioning renowned modern architects such as Pei and Saarinen to design new buildings in Columbus. Pei negotiated with Moore to enlarge a two-metre-high *Large Torso: Arch*, completed in 1963, taking it up to a more architectural scale that would create a strong sense of place in what was a quite dispersed and modest plaza. Effectively a new sculpture, rising to six metres, three times the height of its prototype and wide enough for two people to walk through, *Large Arch* (1971) is the most architectonic of Moore's public sculptures.⁴ The areas of roughened finish and the bone and flesh-like feel of the sculpture's shape, however, are still closer in character to Moore's cast work of the 1950s and early 1960s than to the smoother and more uninflected look of his later bronzes.



Figure 1

Henry Moore, *The Arch* (LH 503b), 1963, bronze, 5.9 × 3.8 m, in situ at the Cleo Rogers Memorial Library, Columbus, Indiana. Digital image courtesy of Henry Moore Archive. Reproduced by permission of the Henry Moore Foundation.

A much more clear-cut new departure is evident in the work Moore fashioned for the large plaza in front of the City Hall in Dallas, which Pei completed in 1978; a unique bronze cast called *The*

Dallas Piece (1978–79) (fig. 2). Here again there was considerable collaboration with the architect. In consultation with Moore, Pei chose the prototype, the *Three Piece Sculpture: Vertebrae* dating from 1968–69. This was subjected to significant modifications. Even though it was already fairly large, at just under three metres high, its size was significantly increased to an elevation of over four-and-a-half metres. Pei worked with Moore deciding on the enlargement and also on a new layout of the three elements. In an interview conducted in 2002, Pei recalled how he set about getting Moore involved:

*You have to intrigue him into it: “Why did you choose this piece?” Then, “How big should this piece be?” Then, when he thinks that the architect is as interested in the scale of the piece as he is, then he gets very animated and he collaborates in thinking about it and eventually making the piece.*⁵

Pei noted how Moore altered the composition, opening it up so the elements were not, as in the original prototype, packed within the confines of a rectangular pedestal: “He regrouped the three vertebrae—three pieces, in such a way that would fit with the plaza and building.”⁶ Pei also indicated that the choice of Moore was not entirely his doing, but also reflected the preferences of local patrons of the arts. Indeed, the funding came not from the city but from a Dallas real estate developer who announced his donation “to the citizens of Dallas” in the inscription accompanying the sculpture.



Figure 2

Henry Moore, *Three Forms Vertebrae (The Dallas Piece)* (LH580a), 1978–79, bronze, 12.19 m length, City Center Park Plaza, Dallas, Texas. Digital image courtesy of the author.



Figure 3

Henry Moore, *Three Forms Vertebrae (The Dallas Piece)* (LH580a), 1978–79, bronze, 12.19 m length, City Center Park Plaza, Dallas, Texas. Digital image courtesy of the author.

In Pei’s mind, the sculpture was an essential component of the larger project which included the plaza, landscaped with an ornamental pool and oak trees, as well as the City Hall building.⁷ Pei is said to have conceived of the relationship between the new City Hall and the skyline of downtown Dallas onto which it faced as “not unlike the one between the building and the Henry Moore sculpture, *The Dallas Piece* . . . the role of the sculpture was to balance the building at the scale of the plaza, just as the role of the building was to balance the spires of downtown at the greater urban scale.”⁸ This said, it is important to note that part of what makes the sculpture so effective in its monumental modernist setting is its incongruity. It has a decidedly non-architectural, slightly flippant biomorphic vitality. The smoothed bulbous shapes no longer recall

the vertebrae from which they derive but look like organisms of some indeterminate kind engaged in endless pushing and probing and recoiling (fig. 3). They are large enough to hold their own against Pei's looming concrete structure; at the same time they have a certain lightness and vitality that enlivens the rigorously spare ceremonial space that they occupy.

The work makes much more of an impact as an urban feature than the publicly sited version of the earlier prototype, *Three Piece Sculpture: Vertebrae*, installed in 1971 outside the new Seattle First National Bank skyscraper in Seattle. This was a cast of an already realized work, and was sited quite conventionally — squeezed into a narrow left-over space between the entrance to the Mies-like office building and a heavily trafficked thoroughfare. Easily seen as a sculpture simply added onto the building, it was almost removed for sale after the Seattle Bank, nearing financial collapse, was bought out by Bank of America and the building was sold off in 1986. As a result of the public outcry this development occasioned, the sculpture was kept in place, suggesting that it had acquired a certain symbolic value as a public good, even if in practice it never functioned as a particularly notable feature of the downtown urban landscape. The Dallas sculpture too has had its problems, vandalized and then fenced off for a time, though now restored. Even so, it has never quite acquired the status of a popular landmark, being too isolated from the inner-city life there is in Dallas to attract wide public attention.

A further collaboration with Pei developed concurrently with *The Dallas Piece* gave rise to one of Moore's very largest creations, *Mirror Knife Edge* (or *Knife Edge Mirror Two Piece*), set in the entrance way to Pei's new East Wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 1978 (fig. 4). This experimented with a rather different relation between sculpture and architectural context.⁹ The circumstances of its commissioning and the adaptation of a pre-existing creation by Moore generally follow the pattern of the Dallas sculpture, give or take some last minute changes in the choice of prototype and the siting.¹⁰ Pei was closely involved with picking out the model, *Knife Edge Two Piece* (1962–65) a cast of which was installed outside the Houses of Parliament in London in 1967, and with determining the work's scale and final placement. The then director of the National Gallery, J. Carter Brown, also played an important role in the process. Mirroring rather than simply replicating the shape of the earlier prototype, and also hugely enlarged, the sculpture clearly announced itself as a new work created specifically for the National Gallery extension. As usual, the funding came from a private source — the Morris & Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation (Cafritz had been a wealthy property developer) — even though the commission was masterminded by a federal institution.



Figure 4

Henry Moore, *Mirror Knife Edge (LH 714)*, 1977, bronze, 5.35 × 3.63 m, outside the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Digital image courtesy of Henry Moore Archive.

The relation between the sculpture and the architecture is particularly interesting in this case. For one thing, the size, at over seven-and-a-half metres high, makes it more architectonic. Also, rather than acting as a counterpoint to the building, *Mirror Knife Edge* tends on first sight to blend in with the architecture framing it. Yet, on sustained viewing, it also emerges as an entity with its own quite powerful dynamic. The two forms are pushed close together but also split apart, with the thin knife edge seemingly having sliced a protruding section from the larger entity. For someone attending to the sculpture, it can suggest a muted if insistent violence. In a way that is characteristic of some of Moore's best later work, the sculpture is simultaneously inanimate and alive, but not overtly figurative. Pei made it clear that one reason he liked Moore's work for his architectural projects was that "It's not anthropomorphic; it's abstract. Even though he used human figures a lot, the human figure is not really obvious in his sculpture."¹¹ At the same time, the sculpture, with its smoothly finished, slightly undulating surfaces—interrupted, unfortunately, by indented lines resulting from the faulty fabrication—is endowed with a low level biomorphic vitality that sets it apart from the solid constructedness of its architectural context.¹² What could have been a monumental, all too imposing creation acquires a degree of lift-off and animation, with the interacting entities oblivious to the abstract ceremonial grandeur of their setting. While not actively competing with its architectural context, nor offering a vividly animate contrast to it, it possesses a pervasive if low-level presence which is felt as much as seen, endowing the entrance with an undertow of unconscious psychic resonance that is usually lacking with work of this kind. For a variety of reasons, some structural to the world of art and corporate finance in the 1970s and some happenstance, Moore deposited one of his most impressive and finely conceptualized public works on the doorstep of a major American institution which had a policy of free public access in tune with his sense of public value. In its almost architectonic scale, this work also set a precedent for Moore's last major sculpture, realized in 1985–86. Rising to a height of 7.6 metres, *Large Figure in a Shelter* is unusual in that it incorporates its own semi-architectural setting of a figure-like motif—as if the idea of a sculpture in an entrance had now become the sculpture. Completed in the year of Moore's death before a final siting had been determined, it now seems singularly at home in the public garden settings where the two casts made of it have been placed; the sculptor's studio at Perry Green in

Hertfordshire and the Park of the Peoples of Europe at Gernika in the Basque region of Spain. At Gernika, it has proved equal to the complex task visited on it of commemorating the fate of the city when the Fascists bombed its civilian population, as well as Basque resilience in the face of this atrocity. Without the opportunities for elaborating his conceptions on a monumental scale provided by Moore's earlier public commissions in America, it is hard to see how he could have embarked at the very end of his career on a work of such evident scope and ambition."

About the author

Alex Potts is author of the books *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (1994 and 2000), *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (2000), and *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (2013). He is co-editor of **The Modern Sculpture Reader ** (2007). His recent publications on sculpture include the catalogue essays "Melvin Edwards' Sculptural Intensity" (2015) and "Martin Puryear: The Persistence of Sculpture" (2016).

Footnotes

1. Pauline Rose, *Henry Moore in America: Art, Business and the Special Relationship* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2013). An article-length version is published on the Tate website under research publications <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/pauline-rose-henry-moores-american-patrons-and-public-commissions-r1145958>. See also Henry J. Seldis, *Henry Moore in America* (New York: Praeger in association with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1973).
2. Anne Wagner, "Moore's Late Sculpture: The Space Between the Knuckles", in Anita Feldman and Anne Wagner, *Henry Moore: Late large Forms* (London: Gagosian Gallery, 2012), 174–79.
3. Philip Jodidio and Janet Adams Strong, *I. M. Pei: Complete Works* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008), 99.
4. A fibreglass version, silhouetted against the Florence skyline, was a striking presence at the Moore exhibition installed in the Forte di Belvedere in 1972; and one in travertine, a donation from the sculptor, formed an effective landscape feature when placed in Kensington Gardens alongside the Serpentine in 1980.
5. Bonnie Lovell, "Interview with I. M. Pei", 1 Aug. 2002 (pdf posted on the Dallas Library website under Texas/Dallas History and Archives division, pp. 9–10. https://dallaslibrary2.org/texas/oralHistory/transcripts_pdf/PeiIeohMing_transcript.pdf).
6. Lovell, "Interview", 5.
7. Lovell, "Interview", 19.
8. Carter Wiseman, *I. M. Pei: A Profile in American Architecture* (New York: Abrams, 1998), 128.
9. This is the public art project by Moore in America whose genesis has been most exhaustively documented. John-Paul Stonard, "Henry Moore's 'Knife edge mirror two piece', at the National Gallery of Art, Washington", *The Burlington Magazine* 153 (April 2011): 249–55.
10. Originally a cast of *Large Spindle Piece* was chosen, but when delivered was rejected as not being suitable, partly because the siting changed from the side of the building along Pennsylvania Avenue to the entrance way.

11. Lovell, “Interview”, 12.
12. On the thinner element one can see the forms of the gridded armature to which the bronze plates were attached showing through. The Singer foundry, which had to fabricate this casting in rather a hurry, did a better job on *The Dallas Piece*.

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Imprint

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| Author | Alex Potts |
| Date | 18 July 2016 |
| Category | Article |
| Review status | Peer Reviewed (Editorial Group) |
| License | Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) |
| Downloads | PDF format |
| Article DOI | https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/apotts |
| Cite as | Potts, Alex. “Henry Moore’s Public Sculpture in the US: The Collaborations with I. M. Pei.” In <i>British Art Studies: British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000</i> (Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina Droth). London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2016. https://britishartstudies-03.netlify.app/moore-usa/ . |