

WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE.

The tree grew out of waste ground under a bridge, a ‘tree of heaven’, vigorous and fast growing. Two main stems shot straight up out of the mud, washed over trash, cans, plastic bottles and mushy paper. Interrupted in their ascent by the underside of the bridge, the two stems bent through ninety degrees, closely following the concrete roof, until, reaching the outer edge, they resumed their upward trajectory. I saw this tree shortly after I began poking around the Ebro riverside, wondering what I was going to make for the Expo.

At first I wanted to copy it, but later came to realise that the image was guiding my choice of site. I looked under and beside all of the bridges in Zaragoza, from the Expo site where Zaha Hadid’s new bridge was beginning, down to the new weir being strung across the river below the Puerta de la Union. I looked at how the bridges were made, at the flotsam and jetsam caught against the piers, at the rippling water, the surface charged and turbulent as the flow increased in the restricted passages.

The Puerta de la Union, seen on that first day with the riverbanks a little raw and the site somewhat muddy, seemed like something Piranesi might have relished, particularly the paired squat and massive raw concrete supporting pillars of the overhead roadways with the streak of blue sky revealed between them. Here was a site that I was interested in and where I wanted to work.

My first ideas involved jamming something between the pillars, as if lodged there by a flood. It was an attractive idea, but I gradually began to think of it as too narrative. My ideas became directed towards something more structured and autonomous yet occupying this extraordinary space. The beginning was a very small object, something that fitted easily into the palm of my hand – a waisted rectangular

form with two upper faces cut away – made, along with some others of the same sort, by quite roughly chopping and cutting semi-hard clay. This small beginning was then rendered as a wire diagram in a computer and the wire expanded to make a tubular framework. This digital file was then printed as a hard, plaster model in a prototyping machine. The result was still small, some 5 centimetres high, but images of this model were the first submitted proposal for the site. The prototyping machine requires the file to be ‘closed’, all the surfaces have to be identified and congruent, otherwise the printer is confused and cannot work. Whatever is produced is hermetic. This is an attractive idea – the river, always in flux, is not closed, but the objects that are in it, on it, under it or beside it are hermetic, their surfaces washed over with water.

To formalize the proposal I turned the model over to a draughtsman to draw the structure, effectively asking him to make production drawings, based on a defined tube size (509 millimetres). These drawings, together with photographs of the model, became the substance of the proposal to the commissioning jury.

For me it was clear that although the sculpture was to be made, its surface should be continuous, one complete object that would arrive on site. The production drawings were intended to enable that aim but still lacked information, so these drawings were translated back into a different 3-D drawing programme and adjusted. From this file, the fabricators were able to produce profiles for cutting the tubes, first proving the construction against a 1:5 scale model. During the making of the sculpture, work has taken place, the parts welded together. Work leaves marks and welding leaves spatters on the stainless steel, which grinding takes off. The finished sculpture develops these haphazard cleaning marks as pattern across the entire sculpture. This pattern of swirls and scuffs picks up direct and reflected light, the bright spots changing depending on where you stand, so the surface itself seems spattered with

light, broken and sparkling like water and echoing the rough cutting and chopping that produced the initial small nugget.

The title of the sculpture, *Water Under The Bridge*, both reflects the idea that the sculpture has an appearance like water and, obviously, refers to its location. In English the phrase has another meaning, connected to time or events passing and leaving little trace, to the inescapable flow of time and memory. The sculpture is situated in a very particular place and the dimension of the tube means that the base square can become a place to sit, to be with others or to be alone, to pass time. And, of course, anyone growing up as I did with a fondness for particular kinds of music knows that ‘at the river’, ‘by the riverside’ and even ‘the river’ are not just expressions of places, but are hymns of longing.

The sculpture was made at Twin Engineering of Bletchley, England by Gary Chapman and Buddy Scott. The initial computer rendering was done by Dick Lion in Cologne, Germany, and the production drawings were made by Mick Myles in Bletchley. The second computer rendering was done by John Casson and Dave Drister, also in Bletchley.

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