

## On Campus

Bentham's *Untitled* gets a new life on campus

BY TAYLOR DAVISON

IN 1979, THE University Students' Council (USC) commissioned Saskatchewan artist Douglas Bentham to create a sculpture in honour of Western's 100th anniversary. Originally located on the Concrete Beach in front of the University Community Centre (UCC), the sculpture, *Untitled*, was meant to reflect the surrounding architecture and cultivate qualities similar to that of a courtyard: a space for students to come together.

Students' reaction to Bentham's work, however, was one of anger and aggression. News of the sculpture's \$40,000 price tag quickly spread throughout campus, creating a backlash over what was widely considered by students to be a misuse of USC funds.

Unknown to students were the details of this purchase, including the fact Bentham had given the university a deal on the sculpture, as most artists of Bentham's status would have accepted no less than \$50,000 for a work of this scale. Additionally, after the \$5,000 fee for the jury and committee assembled to assist the USC with the commission, as well as cost of materials, tools and other general expenses that Bentham incurred, the artist's profit for his one year of work on the piece was just \$15,000.

Still, students fervidly argued this was an irresponsible use of funds in a time fraught with economic restraints and budget cuts. These beliefs soon turned into actions and the sculpture was repeatedly vandalized.

This was not the first time sculptures on Western's campus had been ill received.

London artists Walter Redinger and Edward Zelenak both had works on campus vandalized by university students. When these acts occurred, Maurice Stubbs, a London artist and former director at McIntosh Gallery, believed students were not only reacting to the high cost of these works, but were also simply unaccustomed to contemporary sculpture.

"Public art is often contentious," said James Patten, McIntosh Gallery director/curator. "It's an expensive venture to do major pieces of public art."

"Modernist sculpture of this sort has gone in and out of fashion. All through the 1980s, there was resistance to public sculpture, in general, especially modern abstract public sculpture like the Bentham piece. It has to be seen in the broader context of international modernism that was very optimistic about the future. It's a symbol of international values. These sculptures could be anywhere in the world and still have the same meaning. That vision of the world, that international vision, is very important, and the Bentham piece is certainly one of the best Canadian sculptures of that style."

Bentham did accurately predict the eventual end of the animosity toward his sculpture.

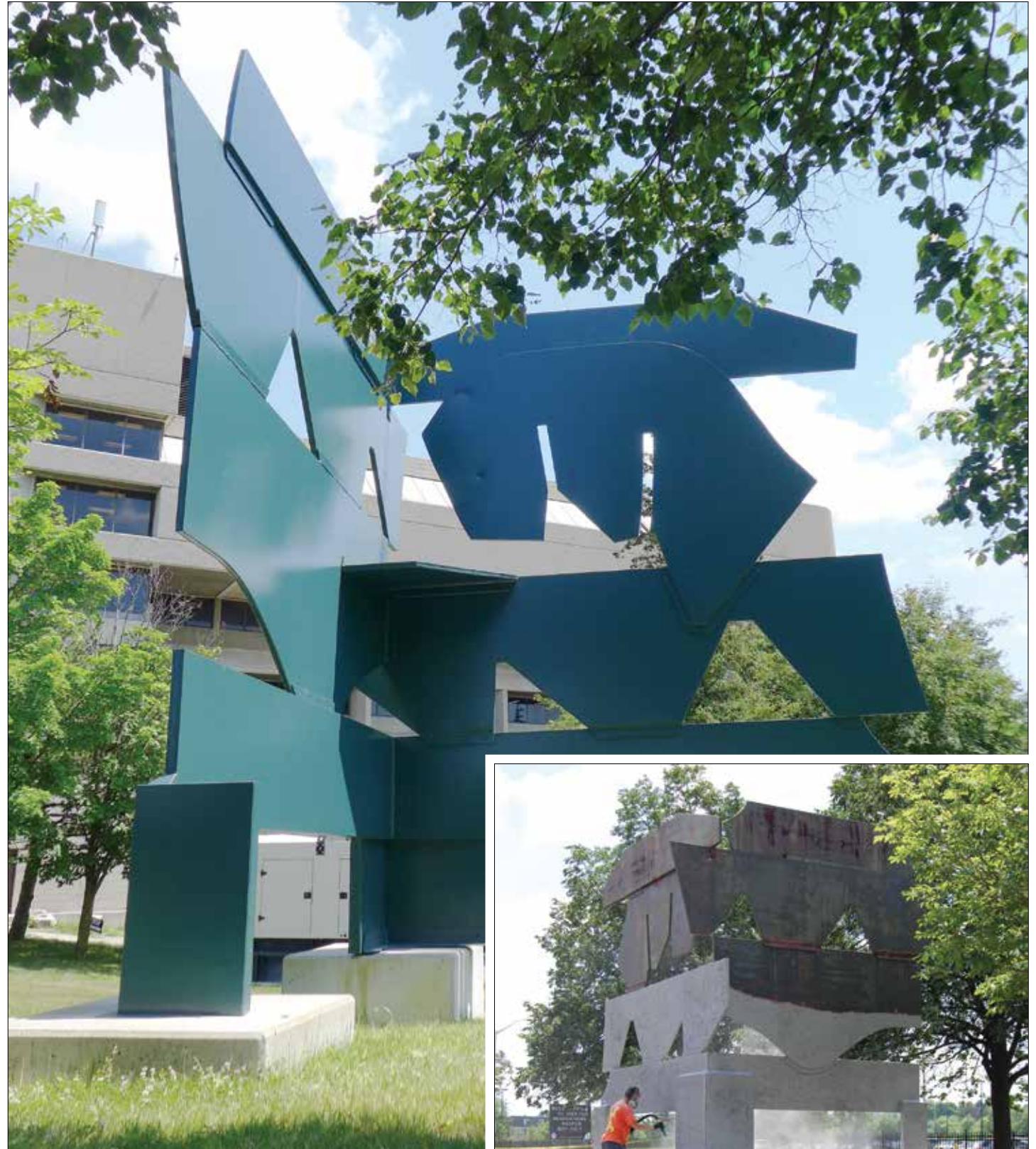
"Some time, down the road, when the dust has settled, I think these people will appreciate it. If they put energy into it, then the work will respond," Bentham said in a 1979 article featured in *The Gazette*. "If they only want to regard it financially, well then, all I can say is that 10 years from now, the piece will be worth twice as much."

He likely did not anticipate his once highly controversial work would become all but forgotten.

As the USC is subject to annual turnover of its representatives, it was easy for Bentham's sculpture to fall by the wayside. Left unmaintained for years, the work's paint chipped and the metal underneath began to rust. The piece was eventually moved to the lawn southwest of the UCC in 2008, but was still paid little attention.

In 2012, the McIntosh Gallery approached then USC president Adam Fearnall to negotiate an arrangement whereby the gallery would absorb Bentham's piece into their collection and, henceforth, be responsible for its maintenance. With the deed of gift signed by Fearnall, the McIntosh Gallery accepted this work by such an influential Canadian artist into their collection.

"It is part of a larger project at the McIntosh to ensure works on campus are secure and main-



SPECIAL TO WESTERN NEWS

*Untitled*, a sculpture created by Saskatchewan artist Douglas Bentham to celebrate Western's 100th anniversary, was recently restored to its original look. In June, crews sandblasted the piece, removing all of the rust and chipped paint from the metal frame. It was then completely repainted using a colour approved by the artist.

tained," said Patten, who first began thinking about restoring the sculpture when he arrived at the gallery as director in 2010. "We explained to the USC that the sculpture would be better cared for if it was in the McIntosh collection and that we were interested in acquiring it. They were really glad and cooperative in turning it over to us."

It was no secret the sculpture was in a dilapidated state, so the McIntosh Gallery began formulating a plan for restoration.

Contacting Bentham was the first step, as his involvement in the decisions surrounding the restoration would be paramount in keeping the work as close to the original as possible.

In June 2014, the project began. The sculpture

was sandblasted, removing all of the rust and chipped paint from the metal frame. It was then completely repainted using a colour approved by the artist. The total cost of the restoration was just over \$5,000.

"We coordinated all the decisions about the process, the colour, with Bentham," Patten said. "It was wonderful to work with him. He was delighted that we were undertaking this restoration."

Bentham's sculpture has now been fully restored and has taken its place, along Western Road near the D.B. Weldon Library and Western Student Services Centre, as an important addition to Western's campus.

After years of controversy and neglect, it

appears the USC investment in Canadian art, and Bentham's bold, unwavering belief in his work, finally paid off.

"I am thrilled to see this artwork restored," Bentham said recently. "Originally conceived for the plaza where it was surrounded by architecture, this new location gives the sculpture much more of a sense of belonging to its environment. Even the colour has a natural compatibility with the setting, allowing the stacked, cut out shapes to read even more pictorially. Placing it against a slope is an inspired decision."

"All in all it is a wonderful installation. Thank you to everyone at Western University involved in making this happen. *Untitled* has a new life."