

Vyner Tree is a sculpture by the artist Tom Price, commissioned by Barratt London for The Courthouse apartments in Westminster. Spanning some 12 metres and cast in bronze, it is a monumental work of art with an iridescent surface as changeable as the weather.

This book brings the story of Vyner Tree to life, describing the sculpture's evolution from drawing board to foundry to its resting place on Romney Street. Illustrated with photographs by Jaroslav Moravec and accompanying explanations by the artist about his experimental process, it reveals how, through great ambition, the artist connects the city's old-world history to the thriving cosmopolitan place it is today and in doing so creates a work of art that is playful, evocative and rich in historical context.

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BARRATT
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the courthouse • SW1
VYNER TREE

PREFACE

As one of London's leading residential developers, Barratt London is focused on delivering the homes and communities that Londoners want and need, today and in the future. Part of our long-term strategic thinking is about how we can create a sense of place and identity through the quality of our residences and the new public spaces we create. Carefully considered public realm and investment in public art are fantastic ways in which we can contribute to the cultural value of our capital and create great places to live.

The Courthouse is one of our most prestigious projects; and commissioning art for such a distinguished area of London brought considerable weight and responsibility. We are delighted with Tom Price's dramatic sculpture that spans both the private space of the courtyard and the public streetscape. Vyner Tree is named after the original street at the back of The Courthouse. It is an ambitious contemporary sculpture, firmly rooted in the medieval use of this site.



Alastair Baird

Regional Managing Director, Barratt London



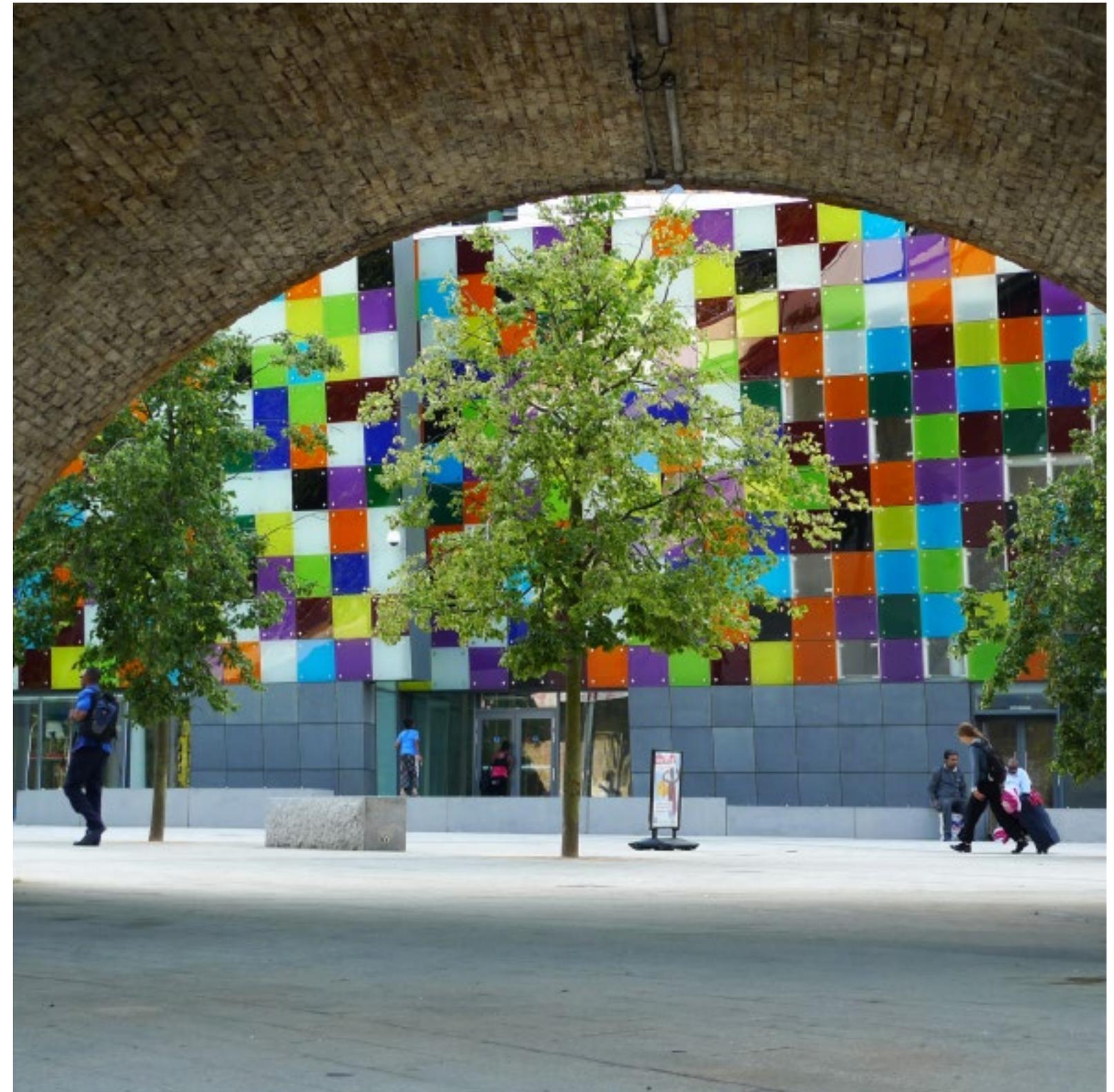
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

PLACEMAKING

From the Agora in ancient Greece with its role as a market place and an arena for public speaking to the English village green, with its cricket pitches and village fetes, the idea of making great, social, human-scale places is not a new one. Public spaces are the connective tissue that bind people together. Yet in the twentieth century the drive for efficiency, together with an ever-increasing suburban sprawl, meant that these once diverse public places became generic. The nation's high streets began to look much like each other, while town planning became dominated by transportation links. The result was a loss of those essential public places.

The twenty-first century sees an ambitious and optimistic desire to re-introduce these social spaces. Placemaking aims to improve the quality of our centres and the lives of the community in tandem. Put into practice, it seeks to build or improve public space, spark public discourse, create beauty and engender civic pride. It connects neighbourhoods, supports community health and safety, grows social justice, catalyses economic development and promotes environmental sustainability. In a nutshell it is about creating an authentic sense of place for people.

For Barratt London working with culture and placemaking agency Futurecity the focus is, and has been in the past, on the communities who use these social spaces, the people who live, work and play there.



CHAPTER 2 – WESTMINSTER CONTEXT

The cultural significance of Westminster is hard to overstate. Home to the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben and Westminster Abbey, unsurprisingly it is one of the first destinations on the London tourist map. Yet it is also the haunt of sharp suited power brokers and politicians who are increasingly favouring the area as a place to live over the genteel terraces of West London. Together with neighbouring Victoria and Mayfair, Westminster is fast becoming the home buyer's popular choice, not least because it boasts some of London's most innovative cultural and educational institutions including Tate Britain, Channel 4 and the University of the Arts, Chelsea.

The area has long been home to many well respected antique dealers and vintage stores; and contemporary galleries, quick to recognise a shift in the zeitgeist, have started to relocate to the area. Phillips de Pury moved into a former Post Office building in Howick Place, while Eleven Fine Art is situated on Ecclestone Street.

The commissioning of Turner Prize nominee Liam Gillick to produce artwork for the exterior façade of the new Home Office building in Marsham Street, together with works by Georgie Hopton and Simon Periton, contribute to a sense of cultural permanence.

Tom Price's new sculpture for The Courthouse sits within this cultural context, opposite Gillick's landmark design and a stone's throw from Channel 4 headquarters on Horseferry Road. The commission was developed from a proposal to create a living wall at the rear of The Courthouse site. Three artists were invited to submit proposals: Simon Periton, Jacqueline Poncelet and Tom Price. It was Price's proposal to realise modern materials in classical bronze, together with the sculpture's connection to the landscape, which excited the judging panel. This artwork is a flagship project for Barratt London, one that will enliven, enhance and agitate the space within the development of The Courthouse.

CHAPTER 3

THE ARTIST

Go back in time far enough and all streets in London were green fields. In the sixteenth century there were vineyards on Horseferry Road. Hard to imagine now as the traffic rattles by and city workers swerve to avoid tourists negotiating the back streets of Victoria to Parliament Square. Yet once this thoroughfare between the boroughs of Westminster and Pimlico was a peaceful backwater of vines and kitchen gardens tended by the monks of Westminster Abbey.

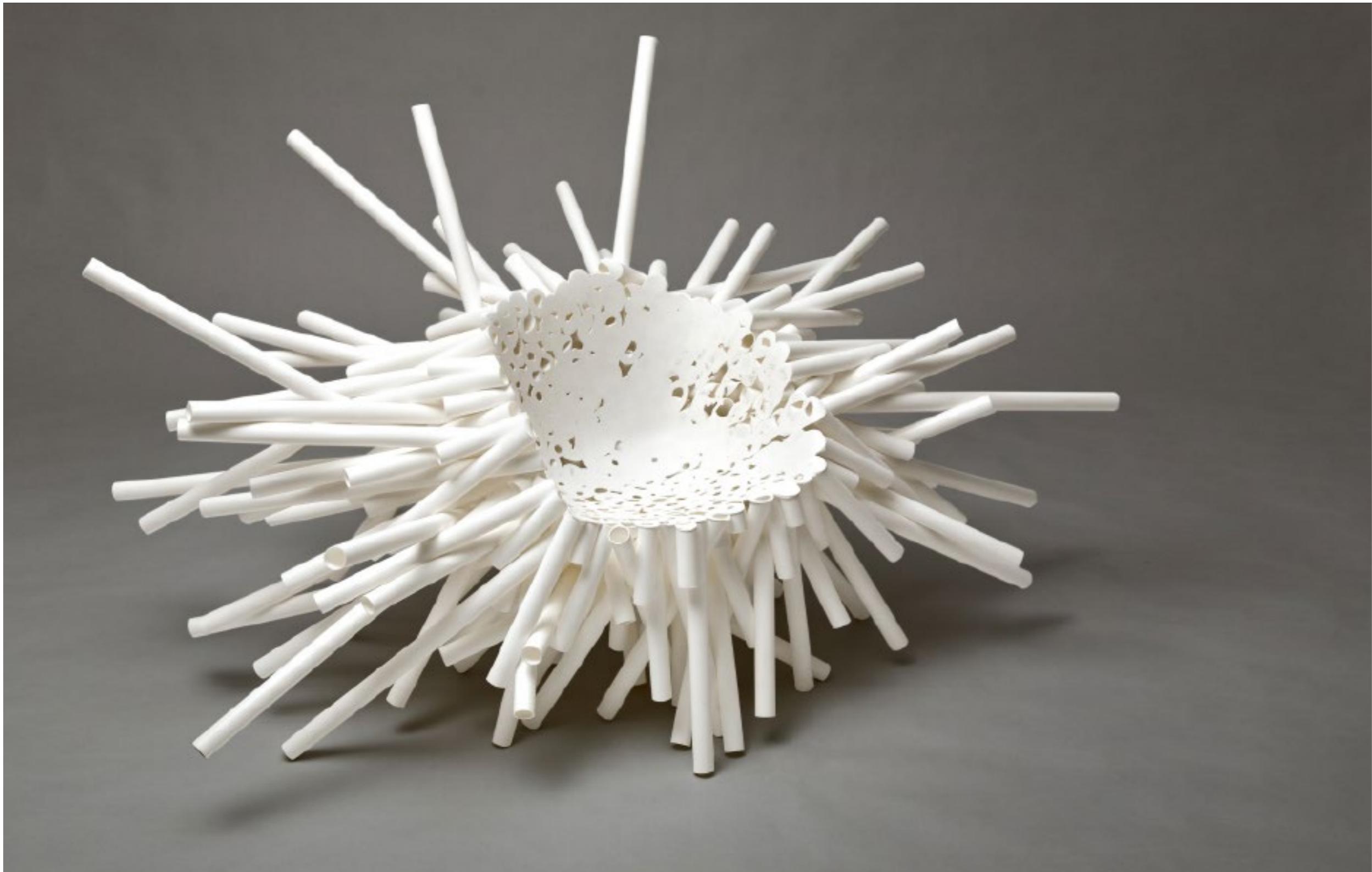
One of the many functions of a public artwork can be to connect us to that long-forgotten history. In Vyner Tree, the London-based artist Tom Price has created something of a monument to this old world. Put simply, it is a vine tree cast from bronze spanning some 12 metres in size and situated against a living wall in the courtyard complex at The Courthouse.

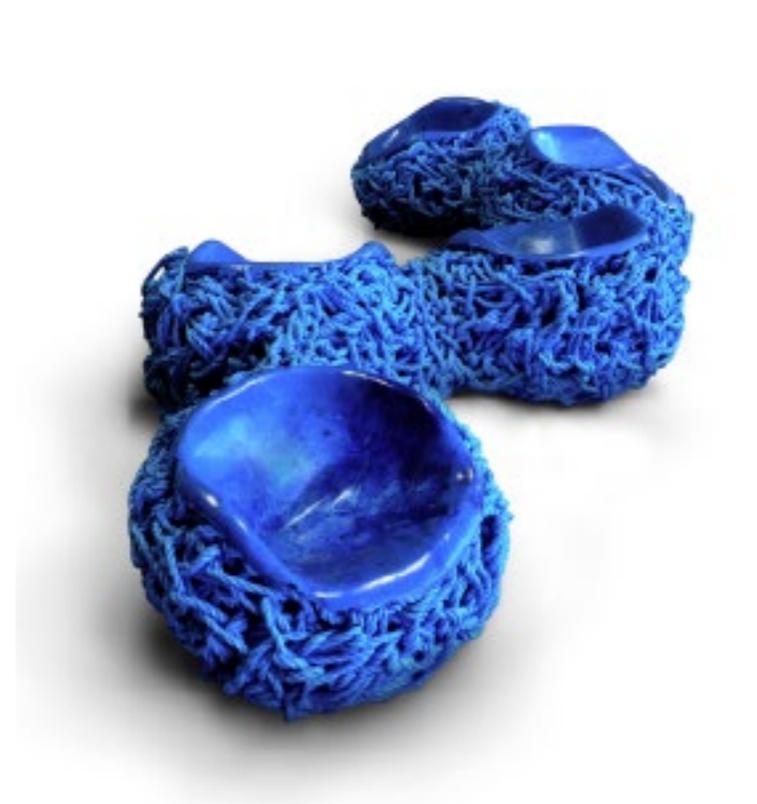
Price is an old hand when it comes to public sculpture, having created two steel works for Gloucester city as well as works for London Metropolitan University and Bloomberg, London, yet this is the first public work he has made in bronze. As an artist's material, bronze has a rich history. Composed mainly of copper with varying degrees of tin, zinc or lead, its great advantages are that it is easier to manipulate than stone, able to take fine detailing and is almost completely indestructible. Over the centuries it has been used to represent both Gods and men, while becoming the medium of choice of the twentieth-century abstract sculptor Henry Moore.

Price has experimented with the metal before as part of a series of sculptures he made after leaving the Royal College of Art in which he melted down different man-made materials and moulded them into chairs. It was a relatively risky undertaking prone to failure, yet it was partly the artist's enjoyment of the experimental process that led to Barratt London awarding the artist The Courthouse commission. Price's commitment to the materials he uses results in works like Vyner Tree, in which he reveals the versatility and quasi-magical properties of bronze that has so enchanted artists for thousands of years.









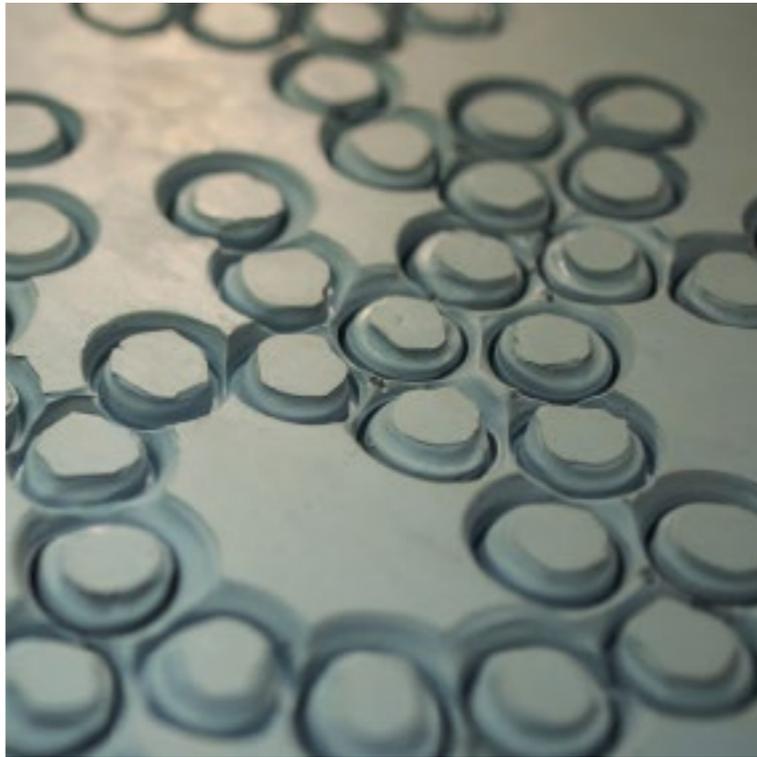
CHAPTER 4

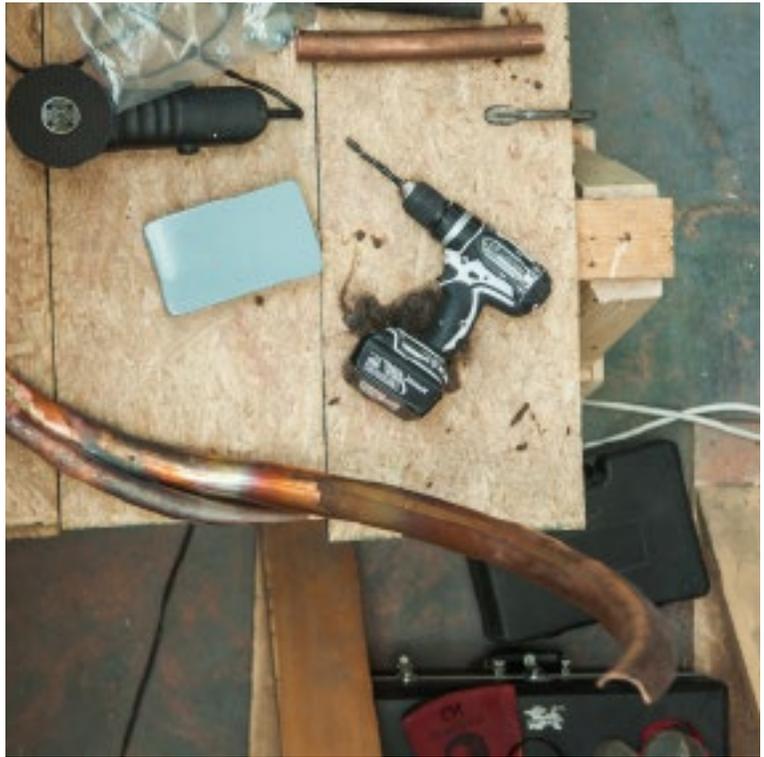
CASTING THE TREE

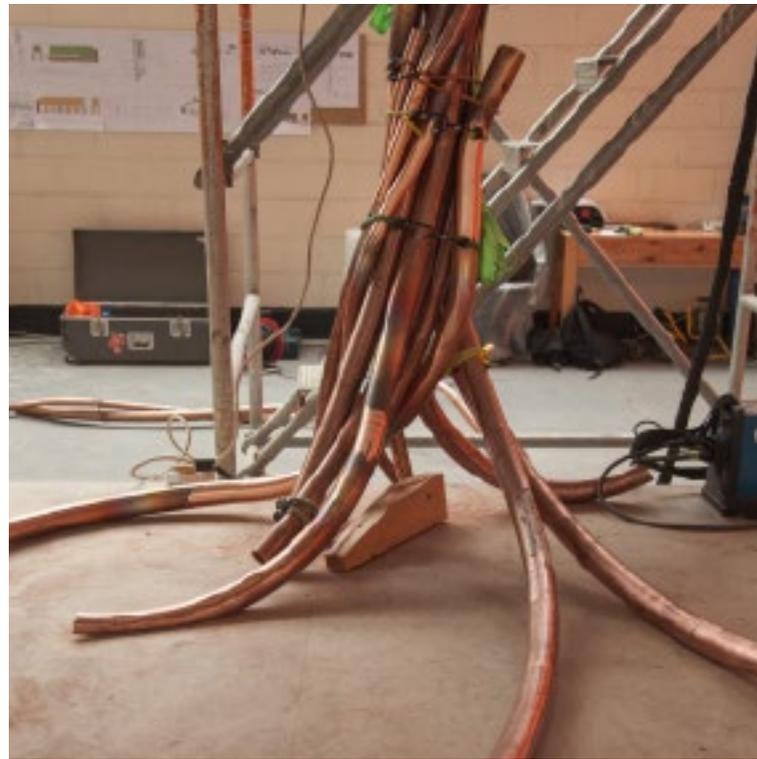
Vyner Tree is inspired by an earlier installation Price made in 2011, in which he created a tree-like landscape out of polypropylene pipes (plastic waste pipes), and nylon cable ties. These polypropylene pipes became the prototypes for the bronze leaves. The decision to cast Vyner Tree in bronze came about predominantly because of the living wall the sculpture would be situated against. "I had to have a material that would stand out from the foliage as well as working in harmony with it," says Price. One of the advantages of polypropylene is that it melts easily, and this meant Price did not have to make a wax casing for the bronze. Nonetheless, casting in bronze is still a highly skilled business. Price chose to have the tree cast at the well-respected HVH Spol. s.r.o. Foundry in Hostinné in the Czech Republic, a family business with a reputation that dates back to the Cold War years when they cast the dignitaries of the day.

One of the team's biggest difficulties was to find a way for the copper pipes, which made up the tree's trunk, to support the weight of the bronze leaves. "Putting it together was almost like an Airfix kit," says Price. "There are lots of different shapes and sections joined by one connecting tube."









CHAPTER 5

CASTING THE ROCKS

At the foot of the tree are three rocks cast from stones that came from the Czech Republic “I needed something simple and organic that would not conflict with the tree,” says Price of the sculptures. The rocks are designed as play sculptures for children so it was important they had no jagged points, which meant searching the Giant Mountains in Northern Bohemia for water-worn stones. The rocks were found in a pile of boulders that had been pulled out of a river near the Spindleruv Myln ski resort. “We were incredibly lucky” says Price, “a man came along with a JCB and just said ‘pick the ones you like.’” Because of their size, ranging between one and two metres, they had to be cast in sections, painting part of the rock in silicon and then covering it in plaster from which a wax mould could be made. These wax moulds were then used to cast the bronze. “Conceptually the rocks would not have worked if they had been made out of a material other than bronze,” says Price. “They had to have a relationship with the tree.”









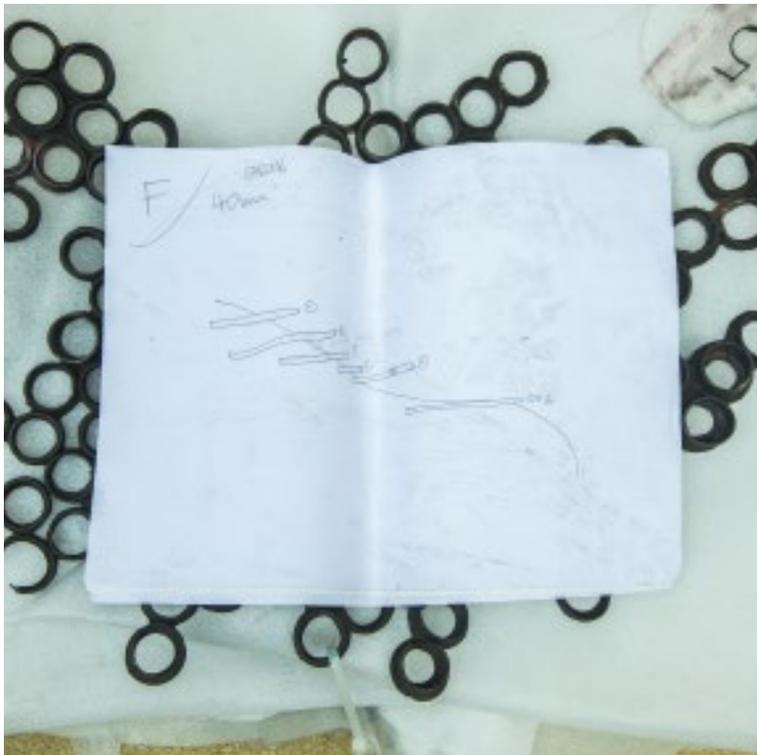
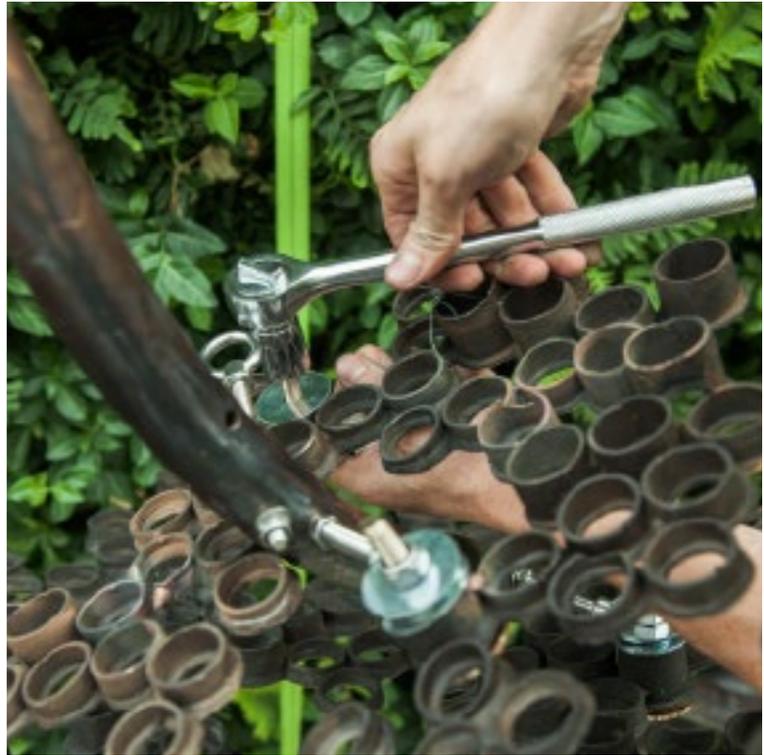
CHAPTER 6

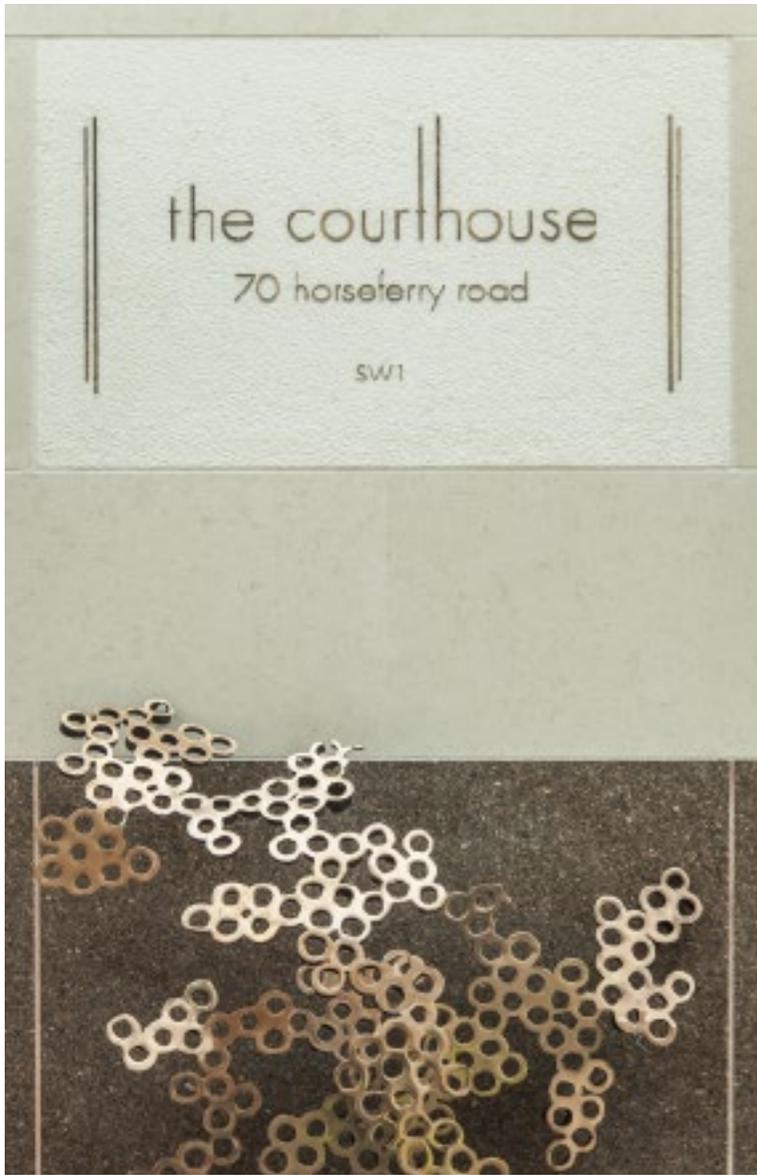
ASSEMBLING AND INSTALLING THE TREE

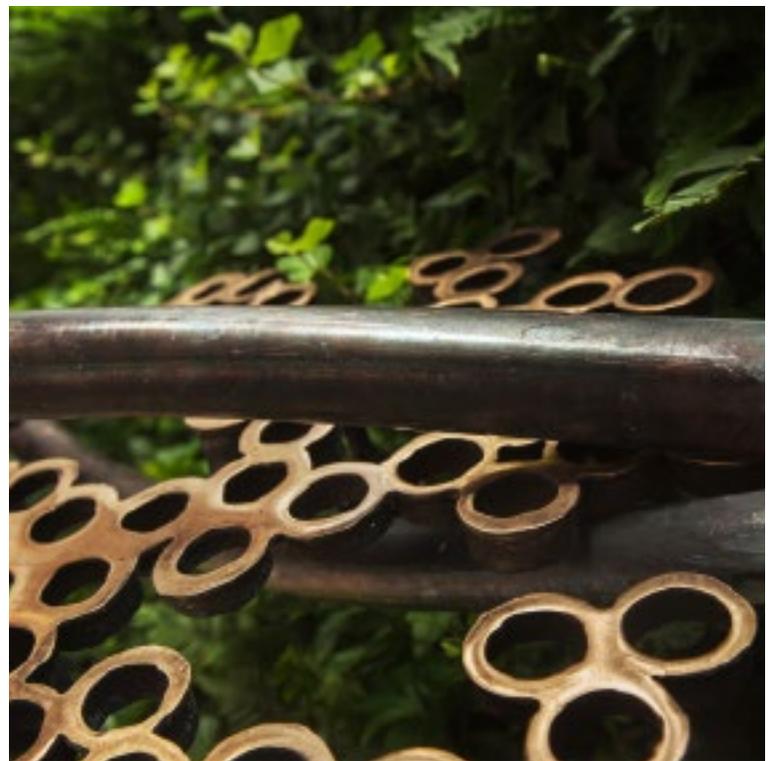
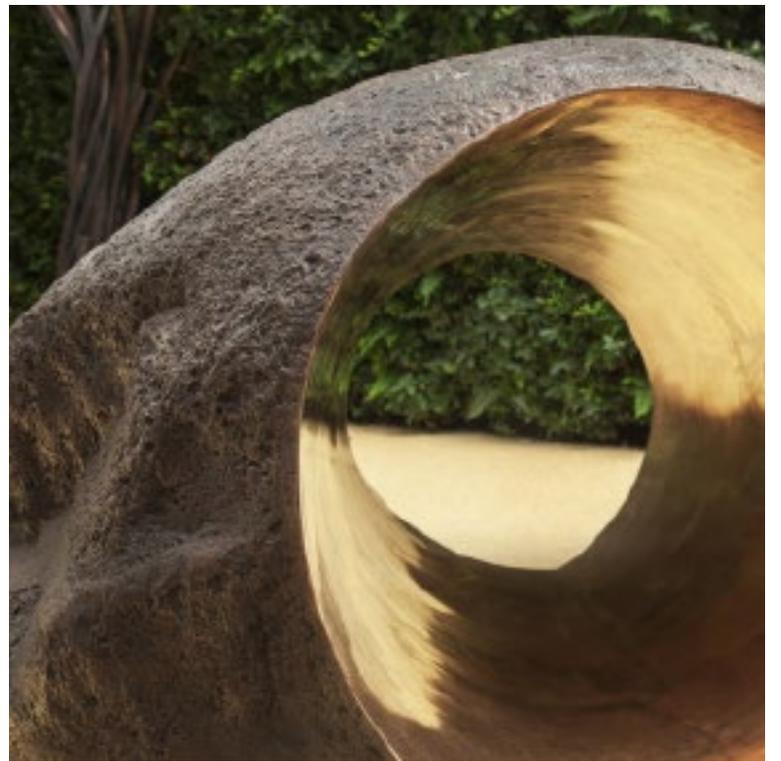
Price studied design before becoming a sculptor, and his practice has often been described as working in the grey areas between the two disciplines. His design background was integral for Vyner Tree. “It is so important to have that understanding of scale and gravity, particularly when you are working with such a heavy material,” says Price. One of the most challenging aspects of the commission was to integrate the tree into the green wall on both sides. “It had to be very accurate; there are brackets coming out of the wall and they needed to come through at exactly the right places.” In the end, Price mocked up a life-size version of the living wall so that he could place the brackets precisely. “It was quite an undertaking, and if things hadn’t lined up, it would have been an absolute disaster.”

The result was worth the time and effort. There’s a kind of alchemy in the way Price allows the form to be dictated by the material, resulting in strange amorphous objects. Vyner Tree unquestionably has its roots in a tradition of sculpture that dates back to ancient Greece, yet the leaves are cast directly from polypropylene tubes, a material that is resolutely modern. In Vyner Tree, Price succeeds in transforming the cheap mass produced material into a shimmering sculpture with a surface as changeable as the weather. It may be physically heavy, yet Vyner Tree’s beauty is in its lightness of being.









ABOUT THE EDITOR

Jessica Lack is a freelance arts writer. She was the previews arts editor of The Guardian Guide for ten years and now contributes to G2 and the arts and culture section online. She also contributes to various art and culture magazines. She recently wrote the Unlock Art Series for Tate Channel and is currently updating her book The Tate Guide to Modern Art Terms.

ABOUT FUTURECITY

Futurecity was commissioned by Barratt London on The Courthouse development. Founded by Mark Davy in 2007, Futurecity curate major arts programmes, devise cultural strategies, broker cultural partnerships and deliver projects from inception to completion. They are responsible for a large number of international programmes including the Crossrail 'Culture Line' for eight new stations, Richard Wilson's Slipstream for Heathrow 'Queens Terminal' 2 and over 100 cross-disciplinary projects in architecture, landscape, infrastructure, transport, healthcare and housing.

CREDITS

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