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How a New Town Gained Identity: Public Art in
Glenrothes and How It Has Come to Embody the
Term 'genius Loci'

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Fine Art

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**How A Scottish New Town Gained Identity: Public Art in Glenrothes and
How This Has Come to Embodiment the Term 'Genius Loci'**

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to answer the questions of how the Scottish New Town of Glenrothes came to be, and why the public artwork within it has played an integral role in creating an identity for the town. This research is important as it fills a gap in current academic knowledge as to how public art was accepted within New Town communities, and the techniques that aided this. I will answer these questions by analyzing the history behind the Scottish New Towns and how the public art within Glenrothes was created in such a way, that it has become integral to the town and its community. I will examine the role of the Town Artist and dive into David Hardings working methods, to uncover how these artworks became accepted within the community. Finally, I propose that the public art within Glenrothes has become the ‘Genius Loci’ of the town, through examining all of the points mentioned previously. This paper emphasizes the significant role public art can play in the town or city it is placed within and the impact it can have on those communities. I will conclude this paper by emphasizing the importance of preserving the artworks within Glenrothes so we can continue to learn from them and the benefits of public art in the future.

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Positionality Statement

I believe it is important to state that I grew up in Glenrothes, the site study for this essay, and lived there for 17 years until I moved away for university in 2022. This means that the town and the art within it are very near and dear to my heart. I have my own personal opinions about the artwork and the significance of its impact on the town; however, I have done my best to back up all my opinions with the thoughts of others to ensure there wasn't an unjust biased while writing this paper.

Introduction to Informal Interview

Before the start of this dissertation, I would like to briefly introduce an informal interview I conducted with Dr Andrew Demitrius, as it has been integral to the writing of this paper. Dr Demitrius currently works at St Andrews University in the Art History department as their Visual Resources Curator and a Research Administrator. Dr Demitrius has done extensive research on Glenrothes and its public art and completed a PHD in that very subject. He was kind enough to sit and talk with me at his office in St Andrews to talk about his work within Glenrothes and what he had discovered throughout his time researching. A full transcript of this informal interview can be found in the appendix of this paper. The information gained through this talk has been utilised throughout this dissertation, especially in chapter two, to give a clearer understanding of how the artwork was received within the Glenrothes community.

Introduction

How did the Scottish New Town of Glenrothes, located in the center of Fife, a town littered with concrete hippos, concrete mushrooms, towering lilies and dinosaurs come to be? And what impact have these artworks had on the town and community within Glenrothes? This dissertation aims to answer these questions, concluding with the belief that the artwork within Glenrothes has become the Genius Loci of the town. I will achieve this by exploring the origins of the New Town in Scotland, the role of the Town Artist, and how public art came to be accepted within the community, aided by David Harding's working methods. Finally, I will explore how the public artwork has come to embody the definition of Genius Loci and present evidence of the lasting effect that public art has had on Glenrothes as a town and the community within. I would like to mention that while Glenrothes is the focal point of this paper, many of the issues discussed are applicable to other Scottish New Towns. Throughout my research I have consulted a variety of sources including books, online articles, peer reviewed journals, video archives, and undertaken an informal interview, to ensure I can present the most accurate and comprehensive research possible.

In Chapter One I will explain the origins of the Scottish New Towns and Glenrothes specifically, through analysis of sources such as *Visionaries and Planners: The Garden City Movement and the Modern Community*, Buder (1990) and *The Civic Survey for the City and Royal Burgh of Edinburgh*, Abercrombie and Plumstead (1949), more commonly known as the Abercrombie Plan. In Chapter Two I will introduce the role of the Town Artist and David Harding specifically, while giving a brief overview of some of the most important public artworks in the town and then exploring how Harding's ways of working aided the acceptance of these artworks into the community. Through Chapter Two I will mainly be referencing my informal interview conducted with Dr Andrew Demetrius and Harding's book *Glenrothes Town Planner*, Harding (1975). In my third and final chapter, I will introduce the term Genius Loci and discuss why the public art in Glenrothes has come to embody this definition. I will present the long-lasting effect the work has had on the town and how that is evidenced today. In my third chapter I have pulled from a few key sources including Fife Councils Town Centre Masterplan for Glenrothes (Fife Council, 2020) and the production of a new adventure playground within Riverside Park (Fife Council, 2025).

A conclusion will summarize all of the points presented throughout this paper and considering all of the evidence presented, conclude that the public artwork within Glenrothes has played a significant role in the building of the town and its identity, in turn becoming the Genius Loci of Glenrothes. This dissertation forms an original contribution to knowledge through examining the significant role that public art played in creating an identity for the New Town of Glenrothes, while also highlighting further gaps in knowledge around the integration of public art within New Towns and the techniques that helped aid this.

Chapter One - The History of the New Town in Scotland

The Garden City and the Origins of the New Town

To fully understand the importance of public art in a New Town setting, such as Glenrothes, we must first understand what a New Town is and where the concept originated. When discussing the modern concept of a New Town we are referring to towns planned and designed through the New Towns Act of 1946 which laid the groundwork for planning and executing the completion of New Towns within the UK, and what began the evolution of the New Town in Britain (Town and country planning association, no date, para. 1). The New Towns act established an ‘ambitious programme for building New Towns’ (UK Parliament, no date, para. 2) and was quickly followed by the Town and Country Planning act in 1947, put in place to ‘restrict the growth of large cities’ and ‘control urban sprawl into the countryside’ (UK Parliament, no date, para. 3). These plans were influenced by the likes of the Garden City movement in an aim to help rebuild post-war Britain and alleviate the pressing issues such as over-population and slum-like conditions in larger cities. The general concept of a New Town was to build several new communities to help accommodate overspill from larger cities such as London and Glasgow. Just as set out in the New Towns Act, this was onset by the ending of World War II, mainly to alleviate slum conditions and accommodate for the sudden boom in population, Greenwood (1973, p. 358). The first New Town built in the UK was Stevenage in Hertfordshire, which was completed in 1946, there were then several New Towns built within the next ten years in England until 1955 (UK Parliament, no date, para. 2). The New Town movement in Scotland began in 1947 when East Kilbride, a town just South of Glasgow, was declared Scotland's first New Town, McConville (2024, para. 1). Within Scotland a total of 6 New Towns were proposed and 5 were successfully built. The towns that were seen through to completion were Cumbernauld, Glenrothes, East Kilbride, Livingston and Irvine, and the 6th town Stonehouse, which was discarded in 1976 (Stonehouse Heritage, no date, para. 1). The New Towns Act was integral to these towns coming to fruition and there are many factors that contributed to its creation.

One of the key figures in New Town history is Ebenezer Howard and his concept of the Garden City (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica article history, no date, para. 1). In

Visionaries and Planners: The Garden City movement and the Modern Community, Buder (1990, pp. 3-4) Buder explains that in 1890 Ebenezer Howard, a court stenographer, proposed the idea of what came to be known as the Garden City. His idea proposed that smaller cities be built outwith larger cities, to help with overcrowding and to aid in new development of these places (Britannica, 2025). Initially, his idea had mixed reactions from the public and the officials he pitched it to, with many describing his idea as a ‘Utopian Fantasy’, Buder (1990, pp. 7-8). However, it would prove that the idea of this ‘experimental community’ (1990, pp. 3-4) was appealing, as off the back of his initial proposal a committee was created to search for a plot of land to purchase outside of London to trial this concept, Buder (1990, pp. 3-4). Unfortunately, Howard's idea was left at a standstill and in an attempt to rally support within the local communities to back his idea, he created the Garden City Association in 1898 (G.C.A) Buder (1990, pp. 78-79). This was rather successful for Howard, as in 1903 his concept was given the go ahead and was now widely regarded as the Garden City, due to its combination of both city and rural life. This came to fruition when the first official Garden City was created that same year, Letchworth (Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, no date, para. 1).

Although Howard’s idea of the Garden City had a large impact on the conceptualisation of the modern New Town, they are quite different in both concept and execution. While the Garden Cities that Howard spoke of were rooted in combining ‘advantages of the most energetic and active town life, with all the beauty and delight of the country’ Howard (1898). The New Towns were larger scale communities planned by the post-World War II government as a way to help disperse overgrowing populations. It was not only the housing crisis after the war that led this movement, but also the feeling that ‘Post-war Britain deserved a new Future’ (TCPA, 2014, pp 21.3-2.2).

The Abercrombie plan

Alongside the Garden City movement there were other factors that contributed to the New Towns of Scotland today, including the Abercrombie plan. *The Civic Survey for the City and Royal Burgh of Edinburgh*, Abercrombie and Plumstead (1949) more commonly known as the Abercrombie plan, proposed in 1949, was controversial in its plans to recommend

‘the clearance of slum districts such as Leith, Gorfie and Dalry, and the rebuilding of Princes Street’ De Rayas (no date, Para. 3) The plan also proposed many new additions to the city, such as a new railway that would cut through the meadows, new ‘industrial zones’ De Rayas (no date, Para. 3) within the centre and an ‘inner ring motorway’ De Rayas (no date, Para. 3) that would have completely changed the layout of the Edinburgh we know today. This focus on the railway and road system was common for the time as ‘Post World War II Britain valued cars as a great tool for economic growth and social movement. Thus, many masterplans of the time, like the Abercrombie plan, placed roads in the centre of cities to facilitate mobility’ De Rayas (no date, Para. 3). This is one influence that we can see in the Scottish New Towns of today, where the emphasis was placed on the roadways and travel routes, with the housing areas built wherever they would fit around these. The Abercrombie Plan was eventually thrown out due to strong backlash from locals and residents who were concerned about how the plan would destroy historic buildings and clear residential areas with no concern for residents, De Rayas (no date, Para. 4) Although not a direct influence on the Scottish New Towns, the Abercrombie plan had an indirect influence on the concepts of town planning in Scotland during the post-World War II period. The focus on dispersing population within the Abercrombie plan, Richard (2010) was also at the heart of the Scottish New Town proposals. A few years before this plan was published, the New Towns Act was passed in 1946 (UK Parliament, no date, para. 3). This act has placed the groundwork for all of the New Towns built in the UK today, and Ebenezer Howard, the Abercrombie plan and their influences who came before, have been the catalyst for all that has come since.

Brutalist Architecture and Glenrothes’ Origins

Due to so many New Towns being proposed and built within a short span of time, there was often a rush to get them built and ready for residents, as Art History Researcher Dr Demetrius stated ‘there was a lot of pressure to get things done quickly, to get people out of, you know, towns and slums, to get them out of old mining communities. To stimulate new experience, industry, new business’ Dr Demetrius (2025). Many of the New Towns look quite similar due to the use of brutalist architecture, which is described by the Tate as ‘an architectural

style of the 1950s and 1960s characterized by simple block-like forms and raw concrete construction' (Tate, 2025).



Fig 1: *Raeburn Heights*, Wimpey, 1967, Glenrothes, Scotland. Image: Peter Atkinson, 2017.

On the Art Stories website, they discuss the introduction of brutalist architecture across Europe and the UK 'With the scale of its designs and emphasis on cheap building materials, Brutalism became the style of choice for many of these projects' (Art Stories, no date, para. 4). The above quote explains that this style of architecture was usually the cheapest option, therefore it is easiest to use when trying to build a town quickly. This choice of architecture and aesthetic resulted in the New Towns feeling stagnant, as many of the buildings looked similar, void of any recognizable features. The town planners needed a way to make these new communities feel welcoming and attractive to new residents. There is a lot of research on what makes a successful town and how it can be planned to keep the residents happy. Before further discussing these methods, I will first introduce Glenrothes, the site study for this Essay.

Soon after the declaration of East Kilbride as a New Town in 1947, the second New Town in Scotland was proposed in 1948, Glenrothes (Town and Country Planning Association, no date, para. 3). Glenrothes was in part created to capitalise of the nearby coal mine, the Rothes Colliery (Northern Mine Research Society, no date, para. 1) and was eventually also used 'as part of rehousing of the Clyde Valley area' (Historic Scotland, 2010, p. 5). In author Keith Fergusons book *A New Towns Heritage: Glenrothes 1948-1955* (1996) he explains that the plan was to create a community with many opportunities for different kinds of employment, in the

hopes of attracting people from all different walks of life. From the coal miners working at the Rothes Colliery to more wealthy families with higher incomes. This would help create a balanced community with more potential for growth and expansion. The success of Glenrothes rested on being able to create a town that felt welcoming and exciting to the new residents, coming from all over the country to create a community of their own. It was also important to give Glenrothes its own identity, something that would draw people in, give them something to identify with and make them feel a part of this New Town. The Glenrothes Town Planners were essentially making a town from scratch, and although the blueprints in terms of architecture and principal were the same as many of the other New Towns, it was crucial to create somewhere that felt unique and individual.

Successful Town Planning

There are many factors that play a part in creating a successful town. As Samuel Hughes, a writer for Building Design, states in his article titled ‘What Makes a Successful New Town’ Hughes (2024) location is one of the most important factors. There needs to be good transport links to other cities, although it can be a positive attribute to have a more rural community, as it makes the town feel like a stand-alone place with its own identity, rather than just a suburb of a larger city. Glenrothes had this factor already and was a town that had a good location within the East of Scotland, which is easily accessible by Glasgow and Edinburgh. Now the hard part was to decide how to make it different and give it an identity. There is a lot of research surrounding how towns can be successfully planned and executed. Two of these books are *The Concise Townscape* by Gordon Cullen (1961) and *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch (1960). In *The Concise Townscape* Cullen states that he believed it was integral to the success of a town to design with contrast and impact in mind, so that it won't ‘slip past us featureless and inert’ Cullen (1961, pp. 9-10). Due to the monotonous style of architecture used within Glenrothes, it was important to create impact like Cullen states, something that would stand out from the architecture and create an identity for the town. A similar sentiment is echoed by Kevin Lynch in *Image of the city* (1960). Lynch believes that to create a city with ‘visual quality’ (1960, pp. 3-4) creating ‘recognizable symbols’ (1960, pp. 3-4) can result in a distinctive city image, which instils a more comforting, enjoyable and recognizable environment for its

residents. Creating the visual quality of Glenrothes had to come from something that created contrast like Cullen states. This is when the public art in Glenrothes was introduced. The ‘recognizable symbols’ that Lynch talks about (1960, pp. 3-4) are represented by the public art within Glenrothes, as Dr Demitrius states when discussing the chief architect within Glenrothes, John Cockhill ‘ They felt that the planning of the New Town had limitations and they wanted art to, I think, add a humanizing element, you know, an aesthetic element’ Dr Demitrius (2025, p. 3). This explanation of what public art did for Glenrothes couldn’t be more accurate. It really did create that humanizing element, in what looked like an industrial town. However, none of that would have been possible without the work of the original Town artist, David Harding. In my next chapter I will expand on the role of the Town Artist and delve into some of the most important artworks within Glenrothes and how they came to be accepted within the community.

Chapter Two – Public Art in Glenrothes and how it Came to be Accepted Within the Community

The Town Artist and David Hardings Artworks

Throughout this chapter I will expand on the role of the Town Artist and introduce David Harding, who held the position within Glenrothes for over 10 years. After introducing the artwork within Glenrothes and delving deeper into some of the most prominent works within the community, I will examine the impact of place in Harding's work, and why it was crucial in the artwork's acceptance into the community. Glenrothes' public art is somewhat of an enigma within the kingdom of Fife, and many of the artworks within the town have now become synonymous with Glenrothes. This would not have been possible without the Town Artist. The concept of a Town Artist is a modern and somewhat controversial idea, considering that art isn't usually at the forefront of something as industrial as town planning. A question emerges, how did it come to be that such an unconventional role played such a huge part in creating the community of not just Glenrothes, but almost all of the Scottish New Towns? The Glenrothes Development Corporation were advertising a role for an individual to 'contribute creatively to the external build of the town' Harding (1975, pp. 1-2). Due to his background in teaching, studying art, and his experience with creating several public art commissions, David Harding was picked for the job.



Fig 2: David Harding photographed in front of one of his works [photograph]. (East, 1975)

Harding was appointed as the Glenrothes Town Artist in 1968 and stayed in that position until 1978. He created, along with his several apprentices, some of the most iconic pieces of public art in Glenrothes. 'The inclusion of the artist in the building team is not a new idea. It has its roots deep in the culture of every civilisation.' Harding (1975, pp. 1-2). Here Harding explains that the inclusion of the artist, most commonly the architect, in the building process of a town isn't a new concept, however, the idea that someone would be integrated to solely make visual art for the town was. In fact, 'Glenrothes became the first New Town anywhere in the world to take on a dedicated town artist' McCumtsy (no date, para. 1). This decision proved crucial in the building of Glenrothes and has made an unimaginable impact on the town and its identity. Harding created many pieces of public art for Glenrothes, and there is no lack of variety in the works he created, from standing stone henges, giant mushrooms, concrete hippos to underpass murals. The artwork on display in Glenrothes is truly unique. One of Harding's earliest works, and one that exhibits his working methods well is 'Henge'.



Fig 3: David Harding, *Henge*, 1970, stone, Glenrothes, Scotland

'Henge' is an artwork comprised of thirteen concrete slabs placed in a circular pattern, similar to those of Stone Henge. All thirteen slabs contain 3D patterns, images and text engraved into them. 'Its surface elements are inspired by world figures of the 20th century – The Beatles, Bob Dylan, Bon- Hoeffler, Pele, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa and many more' Harding (1975, pg. 8, para. 1). Harding's choice to have the stones represent identifiable individuals was a tactical way for him to get the public interested in his work. Not everyone will be willing to accept a 'modern' piece of art into their community, as many people outside of the art world, and within,

see modern art as intimidatingly confusing, and often times when people can't understand artwork, it makes them feel excluded and outcast from the 'intended audience' of the piece, Martin (2021). However, what Harding did here created a link between the public and his work. Almost everyone at the time will have known, for example, who the Beatles were, creating this link, in turn, making the piece feel less intimidating, Dr Demitrius (2025). This encouraged the community within Glenrothes to engage with the artwork, in turn aiding in its acceptance into the community. While discussing 'Henge' with Dr Demitrius, he said this, 'It's definitely not something you can digest all in one go, and that's very deliberate. He recognises that people there need something that's going to sustain them over time so they can go back repeatedly, and we'll see something different every time' Dr Demitrius (2025, p. 9). This shows us that Harding's thought process in creating the artwork went beyond aesthetic quality. He was thinking ahead about how the community could engage with the work, both in the present, and in the future. This is integral when creating work that is planned to grow alongside the community it is placed within, as it needs to be long lasting engaging work, that doesn't get boring after the first time you see it. This piece can be seen as Harding stepping into 'participatory sculpture' Dr Demitrius (2025, p. 9), where there is more to the work than just form and shape, but also reasons for people to engage with it and create their own interpretations. This is a great example of Harding working with the community in mind and creating artwork, not just for himself or the council, but for the people of Glenrothes. This is a theme that runs through Harding's work and is one of the reasons that the artwork in Glenrothes is so beloved and still stands today.

Notably the town's most famous piece of public art was not only produced by Harding, but also in conjunction with his apprentice at the time, Stanley Bonnar. Bonnar and Harding came to be the brains behind Glenrothes' most iconic artwork, 'The Hippos'. 'The Hippos' in Glenrothes have undoubtedly become the unconventional symbol of the town. It is strange to think that something seemingly out of place could become integral to the town and community, but 'The Hippos' continue to reign Glenrothes.



Fig 4: David Harding and Stanley Bonnar, *Concrete Hippos*, Concrete, 1972, Glenrothes, Scotland

In a brochure for the Reimagination Book Festival in Glenrothes, it is stated that when asked, Harding said they decided on the hippo ‘because of its rounded form and opportunity to create humorous and surreal situations’ Topsy and Wilks (2018, p. 1). This decision to create ‘The Hippos’ was a defining one, as it put the artists' relationships with the community to the test. It was integral for Harding and Bonnar to have a working relationship with the public, for something as bizarre as a large fleet of concrete hippos to be well received in a town such as Glenrothes. But to this day ‘The Hippos’ still stand, now in multiple locations around the town as the unofficial mascot of Glenrothes. As Dr Demitrius said, ‘there’s a very good reason why they’ve become the town mascot, in that they do have this kind of universal appeal, and they have this surrealist quality’ Dr Demitrius (2025, p. 14). The very uniqueness of the sculpture is one of the things that made them successful. Breaking the structure of everyday life by coming across something out of the ordinary is an element that came to be integral to David’s practice, which I touch on this later in this chapter.

The Significance of Place

One of the main components that made the public artwork so successful within Glenrothes was Harding’s choice of placement. As Harding stated ‘Art forms are come upon casually and privately and people have the opportunity to see and touch something entirely new to their

experience. They have become the things with which the people around them identify' Harding (1975, pg. 2, para. 4). Here Harding explains that the artworks were often placed in the centre of small residential areas, designed for you to turn the corner and be greeted by a group of wandering hippos or a geometric masterpiece. The choice Harding made to place the work, not only where everyone could see it, but also in more private areas, made it feel personal and involved within the community. This made a statement that the artwork wasn't solely for visitors or officials to revel at, it was made for the everyday Glenrothes resident too. To understand this in more depth, I will now go on to give a brief overview of Glenrothes' geography, so that we can visualise the town and where these artworks were placed.

Glenrothes is now made up of over 15 different areas, however, some that are most populated with public art include, The Kingdom Centre, Auchmuty, Pitteuchar, Caskieberran, Newcastle, and Riverside Park.

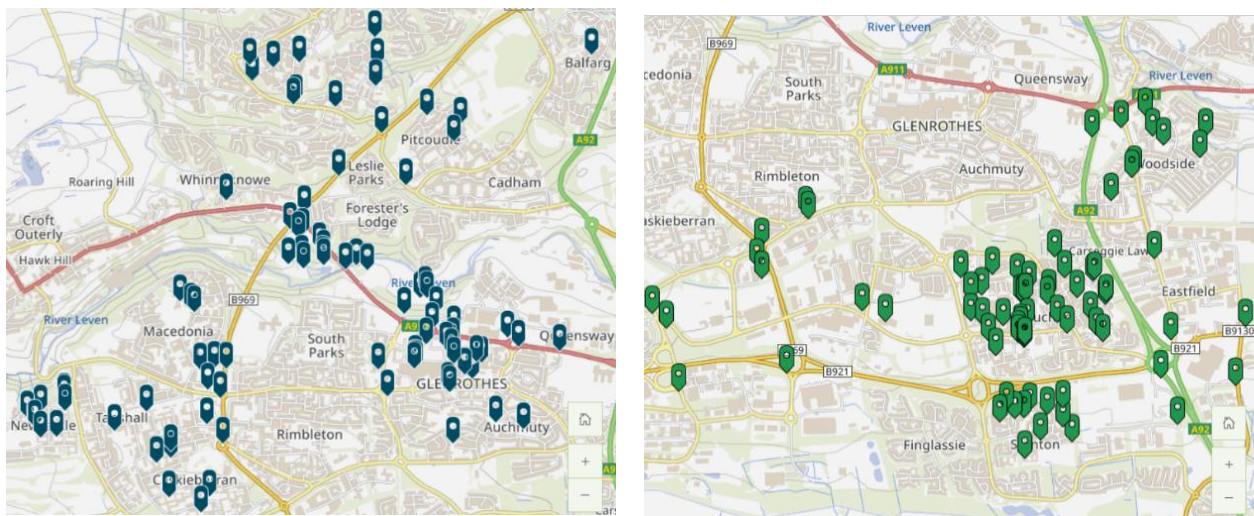


Fig 5: *Maps of Glenrothes' Town Art*, [digital mockup] Story Maps, 2025.

All of these places have their own smaller communities within them, if you didn't live there, you might not know there is artwork within them at all. This was due to the Brutalist style of architecture within the town, which created enclosed and private housing areas, often hidden between small alleyways and maze-like paths. Harding states that 'my work is most strongly in evidence in the housing areas of the town where points of high interest have been created by free-standing forms, colour, wall features and surface textures' Harding (1975, pg. 2, para. 3). These 'points of interest' as also stated by Lynch (1980, pp. 3-4) create a town that has contrast

and is more interesting to explore and live within. It became that the act of coming across these artworks, in an average daily setting, became part of the art itself. Creating something lively, new and exciting within a very plain space. As Dr Demetrius said 'It's about providing identity...physical objects, physical spaces that become places' Dr Demetrius (2025, p. 11). This is a great way to describe what the artwork has done for Glenrothes. It has turned places, that due to the style of architecture, may have just been drab street corners or empty concrete courtyards, into spaces to learn, explore, play and see something out of the ordinary. It has aided in breathing some life into the monotonous architecture throughout the town and helped to create a much-needed identity for Glenrothes.

How Public Art Became Place Markers

The public art of Glenrothes also serves another purpose not initially intended, they became place markers within the town. As Harding stated 'Some have become meeting points and all of them reference points. The latter has been found to be a most useful function within the uniformity of modern residential areas where pedestrian-traffic segregation has done away with the street and the street corner' Harding (1975, pg. 2, para. 4). Many of the New Towns were built around the roadways and traffic systems, often creating enclosed and physically segregated areas of the community. The monotonous architecture made it difficult to identify with any area of the town and due to the nature of Glenrothes being a New Town there weren't really any identifying markers to make your way around. The art became these markers, making it easier to identify where you were, in turn identifying with the art itself. As Harding states 'Workmen and Townspeople have coined the names by which the sculptures are now known and these are used for location- "you can't miss my house, its right next to a giant eagle," a child wrote on the pavement " meet me at the hippos- JB"' Harding (1975, pg. 4, para. 1). The transformation of these artworks into 'geological way markers' Dr Demetrius (2025, p. 13) is an interesting change and one of the first steps in the artwork being accepted within the community and building an identity for Glenrothes.

Working with the Community and Choice of Materials

It is important to note that one of the reasons Harding was so successful was due to him being brought in during the very beginning stages of Glenrothes' development, meaning that he integrated himself into the community and his team very early on. Harding stated that 'I am involved as far as possible, from the planning and design stage of the developments. I see myself very much a member of a team which includes bricklayers, engineers, architects, joiners, foremen, clerks of work and laborer's.' Harding (pg. 2, para. 2). It is important for a Town Artist and the art they create to be successful, that they must integrate themselves into the places they are creating for. Creating art without engaging with the community can make the artwork feel out of place and not relevant to the setting it is within. Dr Demitrius mentioned that 'If something is more securely embedded within the architecture, within the infrastructure, within the built environment, then it is more likely to last' Dr Demitrius (2025, p. 10). Harding created work that was for the community but was also cautious to integrate it within the aesthetics of the town, through his choice of place, subject, and materials. David's ways of working within the community and so closely with the team building Glenrothes, are evidenced in how well loved his artworks still are today.

One other element which has played an immense role in the artwork's acceptance within the community, is materials. In my chat with Dr Demitrius, we spoke about concrete and the significance this had on the artwork. Almost all of Harding's work is made of solely one material, concrete. As Demitrius stated 'I think all the town artists were given a salary, somewhere to work, a permanent contract and somewhere to live, but no money to make anything. So, without materials and budget, what do you do? You've got to be resourceful' Dr Demitrius (2025, p. 10), and that is exactly what David Harding did. He had to use his connections within his working team and use what was available to him, which was concrete. Public art in Glenrothes can be compared to the concept of 'land art' Tate (2025), where work is made using the same materials as its surroundings, so that it becomes part of the environment. Traditionally, this would be work made with natural materials to be placed in nature, Tate (2025, p. 1). In this case, it's concrete sculptures in a concrete town. Due to the planner's tight schedules and budgets, most of the New Town buildings were made from different kinds of concrete, one of the key elements in Glenrothes that gives way to its brutalist style of architecture. When the

artwork is taken out of that New Town context, it loses some, if not all, of its meaning, the works do not exist in isolation' Dr Demitrius (2025, p. 15). As well as visually integrating the work into the townscape, Harding's use of concrete also played a part in helping the new residents engage with their community.



Fig 6: David Harding, *Industry Mural*, 1970, Concrete, Glenrothes, Scotland



Fig 7: David Harding, *Glamis Underpass*, n.d, Concrete, Glenrothes, Scotland

In his murals and underpass works we see Harding create tangible patterns and shapes that people can run their hands along while walking from place to place, or areas where small children can climb and play, Dr Demitrius (2025, p. 13). This encourages the community to engage with their surroundings and grow attachments to certain areas of the town, in turn, connecting the new residents with the town of Glenrothes. Placement and materials, alongside Harding's working methods, were all monumental in integrating the artwork seamlessly into Glenrothes. Not only did art help build the community, but the community helped build the art; interactions with the artwork became integral to its purpose and legacy. This is why I believe public art in Glenrothes has become the Genius Loci of the New Town. In my final chapter, I will now go on to discuss the legacy which the artwork created for the town, while introducing the term Genius Loci (Designs Buildings, 2021, P. 1) and explain its significance in terms of Glenrothes and why the public art has come to encapsulate this description.

Chapter Three – ‘Genius Loci’ and the Lasting Effect Public Art has had on Glenrothes

‘Genius Loci’- The Ancient Definition

There is a term that I believe best describes the public art within Glenrothes and that is Genius Loci. In this chapter I will go on to explain what Genius Loci is and why the public art in Glenrothes has come to embody this term. Finally, I will give examples of the lasting effect the artwork has had on the town, the legacy it has created, and why these works should be preserved for future generations. Firstly, I am going to explain both the ancient and modern-day definitions of Genius Loci and give examples as to why the public artwork in Glenrothes is relevant to both definitions.

Genius Loci is a term that's roots stem from Ancient Roman Mythology, where it described the ‘Protective guardian spirit of a place’ (Designs Buildings, 2021, P. 1), this is relevant to Glenrothes’ public art, as there are many ways in which the artwork has played this role for the town. Glenrothes has endured a lot of mockery since its proposal in 1948, just as many of the other New Towns have, due to their brutalist architecture and unfortunately often run down exteriors, due to budget cuts in the last couple of decades. Glenrothes is no exception, with Urban Realm giving Glenrothes the ‘Carbuncle Award’ in 2009, naming it ‘the most dismal town in Scotland’ due to its ‘featureless concrete’ and being an ‘unattractive public realm’ (Urban Realm, 2009). Although the town has fallen, in places, into a state of disrepair, the positive elements of Glenrothes are rarely highlighted within the media. Including the public artwork that seems to have been swept under the rug to give way for mockery and judgement of the town center and beyond. Many individuals and groups voiced their opinions on the concept of the New Town itself. As Dr Demetrius stated when posed about the question of mockery in Glenrothes, ‘The early New Town developments were heavily criticized by the architectural press. You had things like, ‘wow, what's all this space?’ Dr Demetrius (2025, p. 19). It is this very mockery and criticism that public art has protected Glenrothes from. The work has acted as a protective shield, often deflecting some of that negativity and turning it into curiosity. By looking at Glenrothes from afar, you will never fully understand the relationship between the town, the public art and its community. For example, someone that may have a pre-conceived

negative view of Glenrothes may visit and encounter a couple of hippos, concrete mushrooms or a dressed-up dinosaur and instead of disliking what they see around them, they will question why? By deflecting some of that negativity and turning it into curiosity, the artwork allows people to question the history within the town and why it is full of all the amazing public artwork that resides there. It has a way of revealing the positive parts of Glenrothes and exposing them to the outside world.

‘Genius Loci’ - The Modern Definition

Although Genius Loci has its roots in Ancient Rome, ‘In contemporary usage, it can refer to a places distinctive atmosphere, or the soul of a place’ (Designs Buildings, 2021, P. 1). The artwork in Glenrothes has undoubtedly created this ‘distinctive atmosphere’ resulting in a truly unique town. There is a tangible atmosphere within Glenrothes created through the contrast between the brutalist architecture and the whimsical artwork that litters the streets. This contrast creates a confusing but also intriguing feeling throughout Glenrothes. It makes you wonder why the works are there, much like I did growing up, and you question what you might find around the next corner. For a place that is thought of being worn down, and an overlooked New Town, the art in Glenrothes takes these notions and flips them on their heads, turning Glenrothes into a sanctuary for the weird and wonderful, where people can step out of their homes and be greeted by fantastical sculpture and artwork. This unpredictability and familiar surprise is felt by visitors and locals alike. This is the ‘distinct atmosphere’ that the term Genius Loci describes and I am not the only one who thinks this, as on David Harding’s website he mentions a discussion had at the Reimagination Book Festival in Glenrothes, where the topic of public art was brought up and the locals described the works with this very term ‘ Locals were happy to talk about the art and there was a good reception, it was discussed how the art had become the Genius Loci of the town’ Harding (2019, sec, 5. p. 10). It is significant that the locals who live and grew up around this work, including myself, would define the public art in this very way. When I asked Dr Demetrius whether he thought the art in Glenrothes could be described this way, he said ‘Yes, it is. It does represent a spirit of place, but many people would not necessarily be aware of that or that wouldn’t be their priority. They wouldn’t focus on it, and I think that’s appropriate’ Dr Demetrius (2025, p. 16). What Dr Demetrius is describing here is the way in which the work has

managed to camouflage itself within the town, due to Harding's working methods, including use of materials. Although Dr Demitrius agrees that the artwork could be described as the Genius Loci of Glenrothes, he negates the idea of an overbearing presence that often comes from the term, as it doesn't fit the intention or the outcome of the artwork, which I agree with. Although it is hard to imagine how these artworks could blend seamlessly into the town, Harding's techniques, such as his use of concrete, really lets the artwork slip away into the townscape. This is how the artwork was intended, to grow alongside the town rather than overshadowing it. However, this just further emphasizes its place as the Genius Loci of Glenrothes. The artwork acts as a symbol of not just the art itself, but the community and the history of Glenrothes as a New Town. It doesn't overbear this history, but in fact, shines a light on that often-disregarded part of Glenrothes' past, in turn embodying every part of Glenrothes, becoming the Genius Loci of the town.

Public Arts Lasting Effects on Glenrothes

Public art has created a tangible lasting effect on Glenrothes, which has been exemplified in many ways throughout the years, including The Hippo Parade held in conjunction with primary schools in the area from 2010-2018, Crow (2022). This event saw every primary school being given a fiberglass hippo to decorate, which would all be 'paraded' through the town center. This was an event I often looked forward to at school and was my first real introduction to the importance of the public art within Glenrothes. However, one of the most recent examples of the effect the work has had on the town is evidenced in the new development of Riverside Park. As part of Fife councils' overall plan to improve Glenrothes, including the town center and Riverside Park by 2030, (Fife Council, 2020) in 2025 a new jungle adventure park was built as part of this plan, complete with swings, slides, climbing frames and all centered around one focal point, a ginormous hippo.



Fig 8: *New Adventure Playground in Riverside Park* [photograph]. (Fife Council, 2025)



Fig 9: *Hippo Play Area at New Adventure Playground in Riverside Park* [photograph]. (Kompan, 2025)

The choice of a hippo as the center of this new play area, over 55 years after Bonnar/Harding's initial creations, is a true testament to the impact these works have had on the Glenrothes community. This feels like a full circle moment for Harding's work, not only is it getting the younger generation involved in the new history of Glenrothes, but it is connecting back to some of Harding's initial core values. Harding's artworks were things people could enjoy and interact with, they became play areas for local children and spaces to meet and interact with others, and this new park is a modern reincarnation of those visions and ideals.

I believe that after a period of rest for Glenrothes, where the town has felt neglected, worn down and forgotten about, this new revitalization can bring the spirit of the town, the *Genius Loci*, back to the forefront of everyone's minds. This is exemplified by the 'picnic in the park' event held for the opening of the new park in the summer of 2025 (Fife Council, 2025). This event was a huge success and saw swarms of people flooding into the park to get a look at the new hippo and have a go themselves. As someone who grew up in Glenrothes and has seen firsthand how the town has been treated, overlooked and mocked, it is uplifting to see the community coming together to celebrate the town, especially through 'The Hippos'. This event feels like a modern homage to what the work has done for the town, the work has created an identity for Glenrothes, in turn drawing people there, which was the public artworks initial intention. The impact that these silly concrete creatures, and all of the public art in the town, has

had on Glenrothes is profound. It is hard to imagine Glenrothes without its public art and every person that lives there has encountered and has experienced these works which have influenced them in one way or another. Whether that is a memory of climbing on hippos, playing on large concrete sculptures, driving past towering lilies on your way to work or now newer generations playing at the new adventure playground. Or if you are someone like me, who began to question the origins of these works and why they have been so significant in her life, the public art in Glenrothes has helped shape the town into what it is today. This is why the public artwork in Glenrothes has come to embody the term *Genius Loci*. The artwork has integrated itself into every inch of the community, which has been achieved overtime due to Harding's working techniques, and the concept of the New Town itself. The town planners were able to incorporate artwork in the early stages, making it part of Glenrothes' foundations. This dissertation is a true testament to the impact public art can have on the community it is placed within, and if created in the right way, it can influence the town and its identity on many different levels, eventually creating a legacy for the town that is hard to ignore. The art in Glenrothes should be celebrated and seen by the outside world, but as Dr Demetrius said, 'It's hiding in plain sight' Dr Demetrius (2025, p. 21). The work is so extremely unique in comparison to its surroundings, but people still do not seem to know of it at all, and I hope this paper has given the public artwork the spotlight it deserves. It is so important to protect these works as they represent a monumental time in Scottish History and Art History. As small as it may be, Glenrothes played a huge part in both the Scottish New Town movement and the public art movement and that evidence must not be lost.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have presented how the Scottish New Towns came to be and why Glenrothes specifically was first planned. I have introduced the concept of the Town Artist and explored many of Harding's works, while examining why this work was accepted by the community and how Harding's working methods accommodated this. By Examining materials, space and timeframes, I have proven the reasons that these works have become integral to the community. In my final chapter I ended this essay by explaining why the artwork in Glenrothes has become the Genius Loci of the town. I have taken you on a journey alongside hippos, stone circles and concrete mushrooms and have arrived at the conclusion that this work, in fact, did have an immense impact on the building and creating an identity for Glenrothes.

Now at the end of this paper I hope you have learned about the town of Glenrothes and its significance within not just Scottish History, New Town History and Art History, but its role in revolutionizing town planning in the 20th century. The Town Artist and the very practice of public art was introduced throughout this dissertation, and I hope to have given you insight into this practice and how important it can be, in not just creating a town, but community and exposing people that may not have been otherwise to the art world. This dissertation has formed an original contribution to knowledge through examining the impact public art had within the building and creating an identity for the New Town of Glenrothes, while also uncovering further gaps in knowledge that may contribute further to the academy, in particular the acceptance of artwork into New Town communities and the techniques that aid in achieving this.

I would like to end this paper by emphasizing how important it is that this artwork and its surroundings should be preserved, so we can continue to learn and grow from these practices. By recognizing the importance of public art, we become more aware of our surroundings, what they mean, what their history is and can fight to preserve them, and why not take a trip to Glenrothes while you're at it, I promise you, you won't regret it.

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Appendix

Link to transcript from informal in person interview conducted with Dr Andrew Demetrius on
28th October 2025

[Informal Interview Transcript Link .pdf](#)