



The urban fabric of Sin City

A residency in the American rust belt led Natalie Guy to ponder ideas of boom and bust, manufacture and decline, construction and renewal.

In April 2018 I learnt from Sculpture Space in Utica, New York, that my proposal for a two-month residency in 2019 was successful. Utica is in Oneida County, some 386 miles northwest of New York City. Sculpture Space is one of the oldest sculpture-focused organisations in the world, and this particular residency is funded, with studios and accommodation being supplied. I would have two months of pretty much uninterrupted art-making time, and I welcomed the chance to meet a new group of international artists.

Getting there from the city took about four hours on the train, which was a gentle introduction to the state and the Mohawk Valley at the foot of the Adirondack Mountains, where Utica is located. I arrived in early October on what would prove to be the last hot day of the year and the

only time I would use the outdoor balcony at the double-storey five-bedroom house that the residents share. From the eastern side, I could see the Sculpture Space studios a few minutes' walk away. From the kitchen window, I could see the Utica Club sign, which adorns the Utica brewery complex. The brewery is one of the oldest in the United States and its daily tours are the only tourist attraction in town.

Sculpture Space is set up for the fabrication of big works, with gantries, hoists and roller doors around a vast communal space. Separate wood and metal workshops feature and there are five private studios adjoining the industrial-sized workspace. The large scale of the site works particularly well for American artists, who might bring their own trucks or organise road freight.



Opposite: An empty factory on Columbia Street in Utica, New York, a short distance from the residency accommodation. All photographs by and courtesy of Natalie Guy

Top: A multi-piece wall work made of asphaltum varnish on paper, showing Ronchamp Chapel as a fort (left); and two of nine stained-glass works based on the Ronchamp wall voids (right)

Above: Models based on sections of the Ronchamp Chapel wall produced for bronze casting (left); as seen in the studio at Sculpture Space (right)

For international artists, the equation is different. I decided to concentrate on a series of paper works that I could scale to fit an over-sized plan tube, and later a set of stained-glass window works that could fit into a large suitcase or box. I also continued work on a set of foam models which I would bronze cast back in New Zealand.

For most of 2019, I had been working on a research project about the influence of Le Corbusier's Ronchamp Chapel in France on John Scott and Jim Allen's Futuna Chapel in Wellington. George, the studio manager at Sculpture Space, used to work at a glass manufacturer and is a keen stained-glass window maker. He offered to teach me, which was generous as it is a skill I have been eager to learn. I ordered multiple samples of glass, eventually deciding on a monochrome palette. I made cutting diagrams based on a series of wall-based metal works I had just completed in New Zealand. These were inspired by the inside voids of Ronchamp Chapel's windows. My idea was to represent the 3D internal voids of the Ronchamp windows as flat windows, a kind of

flipping of perspective. I used translucent grey glass of various hues to portray the shadows and an opaque white for the centre. Some of the glass is subtly iridescent, which can be seen only at night or when viewed from certain angles. It functions as a quiet nod back to Futuna Chapel and its multi-coloured reflections.

With these works continuing my Ronchamp/Futuna research, I began looking for late-modernist civic buildings in Utica which I might develop into a new series of work. It transpired however that Utica has only a few significant late-modernist buildings — the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute is the most prominent. This absence is unusual, as the era is usually well represented in developed Western cities around the world. Many other architectural styles are illustrated in Utica, including Greek revival, Italianate, French renaissance, gothic revival and neoclassical. Genesee Street, the long main thoroughfare, contains stately examples of them all and manages to feel the way I imagine Southern states might, with large grand homes, sweeping open sections and generous gardens.



The derelict grain silos of Buffalo, New York

This gentility belies the reputation Utica had during the 1950s when, due to widespread corruption and organised crime, it was known as Sin City.

A few streets back from Genesee Street, the rest of Utica starts. In its prime, the city had a population of over 100,000 people. It is now home to 60,000, a number boosted over the past 20 years by refugees from around the world, including a sizeable Bosnian contingent. This decrease in population and prosperity is visible in the many derelict homes and vacant sections. Unemployment is high here, wages are low, abandoned brick-faced factories are omnipresent. The buildings tell of trade woes and manufacturing decline, the closing of textile mills, cutlery manufacturers and the like. This is now a Republican town, and I was there during a time of political tension with efforts to impeach the president under way in Washington DC.

A few of the abandoned factories are being converted into loft apartments which are congregated around the newly developed Bagg's Square. This area houses the only coffee roaster in town, a good bakery and a short-lived whole foods shop and café which closed down while I was there. Not many people choose to walk in Utica, and even fewer seem to cycle. As November arrived, so did the snow. It didn't snow every day, but often enough that the snow lingered, and my cycling came to an end.

The PrattMWP College of Art and Design has a two-year undergraduate school in Utica with around 200 art students, and there is a community-run gallery and an arts centre. But it was hard to find locals outside of the arts community who knew that Sculpture Space existed or what it does. As it has been a local institution for 40 years and has a prominent sign on its building, this surprised me. I talked to a Vietnamese refugee nail technician, the

Utica-born optometrist on Genesee, a beauty therapist who showed me photos of her Bosnian boyfriend's tattoo art, a yoga teacher who studied art for a year in Syracuse – none of them knew about Sculpture Space.

I pondered what I was contributing to the community as an international resident. Other than participating in the open days and talking to the school groups that came through, I saw my own input as being mainly economic, especially in buying materials for physical sculpture production. However, I also found it hard to find some of the supplies I needed locally, eventually resorting to using an inflatable production company from San Diego and to purchasing glass from a specialist provider in Oregon.

The absence of local modernist buildings in Utica as inspiration was somewhat alleviated when, by chance, I read a *Frieze* article about the grain elevators and silos in Buffalo, New York. These enormous silos were built in the late 1920s. They influenced a cohort of modernist architects, including Le Corbusier.

Buffalo is only three hours north of Utica. At the end of my residency, on the long drive via Niagara and Detroit to Chicago for the flight home, I got to visit them. The silos take up multiple city blocks. Towering high, they loomed above the winter-grey river on a steely, chilly late afternoon. Now unused, they are deservedly maintained as a historical attraction – a fitting monument to industrial modernism and to 20th-century agri-capitalism, made more poignant by their current dereliction. I was excited and inspired to have seen them; they may well feature in a new series of work.

Natalie Guy's trip to Utica was supported by Creative New Zealand. Her sculptural work The Light is at Te Tuhi, Auckland, from 4 April to 19 July.